

JANUARY 2010

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**The Jekyll  
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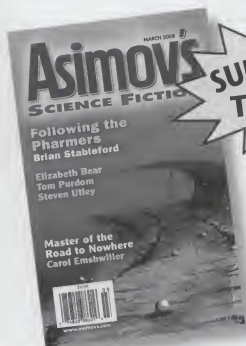
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## SCIENCE FICTION

JANUARY 2010

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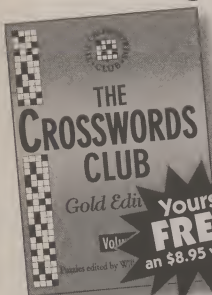
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## A MAGAZINE BY ANY NAME

We were participating on an interesting panel about whether professional magazines deserve Hugo Awards at the 2009 Worldcon in Montreal, Canada, when Gardner Dozois brought up the very Wittgensteinian question: "What is a magazine?" Although not obviously esoteric, this question once precipitated a minor dispute between *Asimov's* and the US Post Office. In the early eighties, the USPS suddenly informed us that *Asimov's* was not a magazine, and thus not eligible for the cheaper second-class postage rates. They thought we might actually be a series of anthologies disguised as a periodical. Our publisher asked the editor, Shawna McCarthy, to write a defense for *Asimov's* that would prove it really was a magazine.

The Post Office seemed to be contending that since we didn't have pictures of swimsuit models, short pithy news items, and ads for automobiles and makeup, and since we were filled with works of fiction, we couldn't be a "magazine." Second-class postage was renamed periodical postage in 1996, but the rules still state "material that has been, or is intended to be, distributed primarily as a book may not be converted into an issue of a periodical by merely placing a periodical's title on it, placing the material within a periodical's cover, or using similar superficial methods." Taking a seemingly obvious route, Shawna saved the day by pointing out that in addition to fiction, we had an editorial, a letters column, a book review and a small number of classified and display ads. We might not look like *People*, *Newsweek*, or *Sports Illustrated*, but, somehow, we still fit within the Platonic ideal of what constitutes a magazine. Indeed, despite the USPS's insistence on a diversity of material, there have been magazines like *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, which, before its redesign in

the early eighties, published only stories and hadn't any nonfiction columns.

It's probably just as well that neither Shawna nor the USPS resorted to the Oxford English Dictionary to resolve this conundrum. The word "magazine" can trace its root to "makhāzin," the plural of the Arabic word for storehouse. After wading through fifteen hundred words to reach definition 5. a., we discover that the first recorded use of the word in a figurative sense similar to the way we use it today was in fact a reference to a *book* as "a storehouse of information on a specified subject or for a particular class of persons." It's not until 1731, a hundred years later, that we find the word used in the modern sense of definition 5. b. "A periodical publication containing articles by various writers; chiefly, [one] intended for general rather than learned or professional readers, and consisting of a miscellany of critical and descriptive articles, essays, works of fiction, etc."

For its own purposes, the Post Office further insists that "periodical publications must be formed of printed sheets." Older regulations specified that these sheets were made out of paper, but they can now be "paper, cellophane, foil, or other similar materials." While we don't go in for cellophane or foil, we here at the *magazinary*\* tend to think of a magazine as a paper product. Indeed, even the online [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com) says that a magazine is "usually bound in a paper cover."

Nowadays, though, most people would agree that a definition of "magazine" that limited the word to mean a paper artifact would be much too narrow. Although we've coined terms like "e-zine" and "webzine" to refer to certain electron-

\*A word I learned while perusing the OED with my magnifying glass. Wags at the office allowed that the term made sense since our place is so much like a cannery or a brewery—not.

ic entities that exist in cyberspace, it's clear that these sites share many of the same figurative aspects of a storehouse that magazines do. In addition to fiction, sites like *Clarkesworld* and the now defunct *Baen's Universe* have had beautiful covers and thoughtful editorials. *Strange Horizons* has poems, insightful book reviews, and nonfiction articles. Although *Asimov's* has a web presence, we don't exist online as an "e-zine" or a "magazine." On the other hand, we are available from **Fictionwise**, the eBook retailer, and on **Amazon's Kindle** in a downloadable electronic format, and we expect to be offered at other electronic venues soon. The number of subscribers to our print edition is almost exactly the same as last year, but we've seen explosive growth in electronic subscriptions. More than 10 percent of you now take delivery of the magazine as an electronic download.

The Worldcon panel didn't resolve the question of whether the Hugo Award for professional magazine should be reinstated any better than this editorial establishes a rigid definition for "magazine." The twentieth century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, looked at the equally thorny concept of "game" in his groundbreaking work, *Philosophical Investigations*. That term can refer to such diverse activities as football and solitaire as well as chess, ring-around-the-roses, and *Call of Duty*. After discussing a number of different games, Wittgenstein said, "the result of the examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail." Rather than look for the one thing these activities all had in common, he wrote, "I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances.'"

From the early *Hitchcock* to *People*, and from *Newsweek* to *Strange Horizons*, we're quite happy to continue having fun on the playing field with the rest of our kin. We'll do so in both our print and electronic editions, and in other distribution formats now in existence or hereafter known or devised. ○

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## THE ANTIKYTHERA COMPUTER

The Mediterranean has been a busy maritime waterway since prehistoric times, but it is often a stormy sea; and, inevitably, an uncounted number of the ancient mariners' vessels came to grief and finished their voyages many fathoms deep. A darkening of the sky, a sudden storm, and a majestic ship bound for Spain or North Africa or the coast of Asia Minor might capsize in a moment. The Mediterranean is littered with the remains of ships of all ages, going back to the dawn of shipping some four or five thousand years ago.

It was no secret that those vessels were down there, laden with treasure—gold and silver bullion, works of art, cargoes of pottery or weapons. The problem was to reach them, something that was almost impossible before the development of modern diving gear. In recent centuries fishermen would, from time to time, bring up some fragment of a statue, some slime-encrusted vase, to remind modern inhabitants of the region of the sunken ancient treasures in that sea, but such finds were few and far between.

Once diving bells and diving suits came into general use in the nineteenth century, it became more feasible to search the ocean floor for these ancient treasures, and many significant discoveries resulted. One of the most spectacular such finds came in 1900, when two Greek ships bearing divers returning from a sponge-gathering expedition off the coast of Tunisia were compelled by one of those Mediterranean storms to take refuge off the island of Antikythera, at the very tip of the Greek archipelago not far from Crete. While waiting for the storm to blow itself out the thrifty captain decided to look for marketable sponges right there, and sent a diver named Elias Stadiatis, equipped with a helmet and weighted

boots, down 150 feet to the bottom. There Stadiatis found himself wandering in a confused tangle of statuary—a marble goddess, huge stone horses, and much more, dozens of statues, marking the site of some ancient shipwreck.

It was plainly a major archaeological find. The sponge-divers reported it to the Greek government, which, in November 1900, sent a Navy vessel equipped with the most modern diving equipment of the day to explore the site. Nine months of difficult and dangerous work produced a life-sized bronze head, two large marble statues, and many smaller pieces. Archaeologists determined that the ship bearing these treasures had gone to the bottom somewhere around the dawn of the Christian era on a voyage from Athens to Rome. The bronze statues could be dated, from their style, to the era of Socrates and Plato, about four hundred years before the time of the shipwreck. The marble ones were newer—first-century copies of much older Greek work. The leaden bases of many of the statues were bent and torn, as though the statues had been ripped up violently, and that led archaeologists to speculate that they might have been the booty of Roman marauders who looted the temples of Greece in 86 BC, under the dictator Sulla.

The statues were magnificent ones. But the most important single find of the Antikythera expedition was a battered and badly corroded lump of bronze that the archaeologists originally tossed aside as worthless. In 1902, Valerios Stais of the National Museum in Athens took a close second look and was startled to see that it had dials, gear-wheels, and inscribed plates. It was, in fact, a complex machine, which was—and still is—the only mechanical object that has come down to us from ancient Greece. Modern



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*Asimov's*, March 2008

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Long Form  
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*Doctor Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*

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**Best Professional Editor:**

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Ellen Datlow

**Best Professional Artist**

Donato Giancola

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*Weird Tales*  
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& Stephen H. Segal

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*Electric Velocipede*  
Edited by John Klima

**Best Fan Writer**

Cheryl Morgan

**Best Fan Artist**

Frank Wu

**John W. Campbell Award for  
Best New Writer**

David Anthony Durham

study has shown that it is nothing less than a highly complicated device for performing astronomical computations.

Discovering exactly what the mechanism's purpose had been took many years. First, certain associated bits and pieces had to be inserted in the main body of the instrument. Then the rust and calcification had to be cleared away. The dials and inscriptions thus revealed left little doubt that it was some sort of astronomical device. For a long time archaeologists thought it was a navigational instrument, perhaps an astrolabe, an instrument used for fixing a ship's position by the stars.

The task of cleaning the mysterious mechanism took more than half a century. In 1955, the Yale historian Derek J. de Solla Price, working in association with George Stamires, a specialist in ancient Greek inscriptions, finally succeeded in properly fitting the various fragments of the machine together, and realized that the instrument, whatever it was, was basically intact. Originally, they said, it must have looked rather like an old clock: a wooden box with hinged doors, containing the gears and dials. The wooden parts had vanished over the twenty centuries of submersion. But the rest of the device appeared to be complete.

Stamires was able to show that the lettering on the inscribed plates was in a style known to be no older than 100 BC and to have gone out of use around the time of Christ. And the words of the inscription supported this observation. They included some astronomical data similar to that compiled by a Greek named Geminus about 77 B.C. The mechanism provided a clear and indisputable way of dating the wreck.

Price and Stamires's theory of what the thing had been used for became more controversial. One of the dials bore the signs of the zodiac, another the names of the months. As the gears turned, they said, the instrument would provide information about the risings and settings of the important constellations throughout the year. Other dials gave much more complicated astronomical data. Price and

Stamires concluded that the machine was indeed some type of navigational instrument. But if it was an astrolabe, it was one that was far more complex in conception than any previously known astrolabe of the era.

Other scientists doubted that the first-century Greeks could have been capable of constructing what was essentially a mechanical computing machine, as Price and Stamires suggested it was, and their hypothesis was brushed aside. A couple of years ago, though, a team of British, Greek, and American researchers headed by the astronomer Mike Edmunds of the University of Cardiff, Wales, and the mathematician and filmmaker Tony Freeth, took a new look at the Antikythera gadget, making use of three-dimensional X-ray tomography and high-resolution imaging systems, and provided a startling confirmation of the device's technological significance and a better understanding of its function.

Previously unseen inscriptions came into view, which appeared to relate to lunar and planetary movements. At least thirty bronze gear-wheels were identified, and there may have been as many as thirty-seven. A pin-and-slot mechanism linking two of the wheels produced a representation of the Moon's elliptical journey around the Earth that was in accordance with the calculations of the Greek astronomer Hipparchos, who flourished in the second century BC and was the first to arrive at an understanding of the motions of heavenly bodies that approximates our modern ideas.

The new Antikythera findings suggest that the instrument—which was probably built between 150 and 100 BC, and might even have been the work of Hipparchos himself—does not seem to have been a navigational device, as most twentieth-century students of it had speculated, but could have been used to calculate calendars for planting and harvesting, or to set the dates of religious festivals according to the positions of the planets. We may never know its exact purpose. But what is not in doubt is that it demon-

strates, as the recent researchers noted, "an unexpected degree of technical sophistication for the period," far exceeding in complexity any similar instruments of the next thousand years. Not until the heyday of Arabic science around 900 AD did any such geared calendrical devices reappear. It would not be improper, really, to call the Antikythera mechanism the oldest known computer.

What it tells us is that the ancients may well have been far more advanced technologically than we ever suspected, and that the lucky survival of the Antikythera mechanism hints at the existence of a great range of Greco-Roman calculating devices, employed not only for calendrical work or astronomical studies but in their remarkable engineering accomplishments. The Greeks and the Romans, not having access to electricity, semiconductors, and wi-fi linkages, did not, of course, have computers of the sort that every six-year-old child uses today. But they may well have had—and it is a thought that should take today's technological whizzes down a peg—all manner of intricate computational instruments, about which we know nothing, simply be-

cause they did not happen to come down to us in the archaeological record, and at the close of their great age much of what they knew was simply lost, not to be rediscovered for many centuries. How far their technological reach extended is still largely a matter for conjecture. We know a great deal about those great ancient civilizations, yes, but our knowledge very likely is just the merest sliver of the total story. As Derek de Solla Price put it, close to half a century ago, in the article that first revealed the Antikythera instrument to the scientific world:

The Antikythera mechanism was no flash in the pan, but was part of an important current in Hellenistic civilization. History has contrived to keep that current dark to us, and only the accidental underwater preservation of fragments that would otherwise have crumbled to dust has now brought it to light. It is a bit frightening to know that just before the fall of their great civilization the ancient Greeks had come so close to our age, not only in their thought, but in their scientific technology. ○

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## DUDE, WHERE'S MY HOVERCAR?

yogi

When I was a kid, I couldn't wait for the future to arrive. The world of the twenty-first century promised to be a kind of technologically enchanted wonderland, sort of an **Oz** <*thewizardofoz.info*> with robots instead of Munchkins. Okay, okay, there was always the chance that we would nuke ourselves back into the Stone Age, but stories about the apocalypse made up just a small fraction of the SF books, comics, and TV shows that I and millions of other impressionable youngsters were exposed to. We expected to grow up into a shiny and well-engineered future that ran at supersonic speed on clean atomic power. And by the day after tomorrow, humanity was supposed to be just a step away from the stars.

At this point in human history we are, I fear, not quite so bedazzled by the future. My fellow Baby Boomers, as well as the GenXers, the Millennials, and even fifth graders of all stripes, have reason to be concerned about what is to come. It is a measure of our plight that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists' dreaded **Doomsday Clock** <*thebulletin.org/content/doomsday-clock/overview*>, which during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 stood at seven minutes to midnight, today has been pushed up to five minutes until that fateful hour, the figurative midnight being the moment we will obliterate ourselves. Although nukes are as much a threat as ever, they have pretty much dropped off our cultural radar, given our other problems. These days we have climate change on our minds, not to mention environmental degradation,

mass extinction, and depletion of fossil fuels. In fact, there is so much to worry about that many of us have become numb to our danger.

*Oops. Sorry if I spoiled your lunch.*

It is not only that the future is scary, but that it is also pretty much unpredictable, as **Vernor Vinge** <*mindstalk.net/vinge*> and the **Singularity** <*singularity.com*> crowd have pointed out. Or rather, we now realize how hard the next fifty years will be to predict, whereas many of our SF forebearers, writing in the aftermath of World War II, blithely described the dawn of the upcoming century as if they were looking over the fence into their next door neighbor's backyard. They wrote in a time before the **Civil Rights Act** <*archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act*> here in the States, the **empowerment of women** <*unfpa.org/gender/empowerment.htm*>, the **gay rights movement** <*gayrights.change.org*>, the **fall of the Soviet Union** <*coldwar.org/articles/90s/fall\_of\_the\_soviet\_union.asp*>, the **rise of China** <*state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/18902.htm*>, and the **reawakening of Islam** <*islam.com*>. Who really understood the difficulty and expense of sending humans to orbit, much less to Alpha Centauri? When John F. Kennedy called for a **national effort to put a man on the moon** <*nasm.si.edu/collections/imagery/Apollo/apollo.htm*>, did any SF writer or futurist predict that we would quickly accomplish this spectacular feat and then abandon the moon for thirty-seven years—and still counting? Even those who glimpsed the edges of the digital revolution failed to imagine the economic and cultural upheavals

that the internet and ubiquitous computing would cause.

Small wonder that for some, to quote the immortal **Yogi Berra** <yogiberra.com>, "The future ain't what it used to be."

### *nostalgia*

At least one institution concerned with predicting the future has given up the task as pretty much hopeless. Last year *Washington Post* staff writer Joel Garreau visited Disneyland's new Tomorrowland attraction, the **Innovations Dream Home** <disneylandevent.com/tsm/dreamhome.html> and wrote a smart cultural commentary entitled "The Future Is So Yesterday" <washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/18/AR2008071800837.html>. He found Disney's house of the future to be kind of retro, filled with tech that is more or less available right now, like flat screen TVs and voice activated talking computers. As Garreau notes:

"But this is absolutely not the future in the research pipeline. No genetically modified critters here that eat carbon dioxide and poop gasoline. No nanobots smaller than blood cells, cruising our bodies to zap cancer. No brain implants that expand our memory. No cellphones that translate Chinese. No dragonfly-size surveillance bots, no pills that shut off the brain's trigger to sleep, no modified mitochondria sustaining our energy while making obesity as quaint as polio."

He argues that this diverges from Walt Disney's original futurist vision for Tomorrowland, which borrowed its conceit from the **New York World's Fair of 1939** <xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/DISPLAY/39wf/front.htm>. Twenty-five years later, when another **World's Fair** <nywf64.com> opened in New York, Disney's fingerprints were all over it, which featured Tomorrowland-like tours of the future as conceived by the engineers of Ford and General Electric.

**Danny Hillis** <longnow.org/people/board>, who once served as a vice president for research at **Disney Imagineer-**

**ing** <corporate.disney.go.com/careers/who\_imagineering.html>, and who is now co-chairman of the **Long Now Foundation** <longnow.org>, commented on the new retro Tomorrowland on the **Long Now's blog** <blog.longnow.org/2008/07/23/the-future-is-so-yesterday>: "... we are nostalgic for a time when we believed in the future. People miss the future. There's a yearning for it. Disney does know what people want. People want to feel some connectedness to the future. The way Disney delivers that is to reach back in time a little bit to the past when they did feel connected."

### *retro cool*

The impulse to imagine historical do-overs has ever been present in science fiction. After all, what are **alternate history** <asimovs.com/\_issue\_0810/onthenet.shtml> and **steampunk** <steampunk.com>? If the future is too scary or unknowable or weird, why not step back in time to a safe remove and re-envision it? As David Zondy of the website **Tales of Future Past** <davidszondy.com/future/futurepast.htm> writes, "It wasn't that long ago that we had a future. I mean, we have one now; the world isn't going to crash into the Sun or anything like that. What I mean is that we had a future that we could clearly imagine." Zondy's site is organized around tours of the future as depicted by the mass media of the last century. Take a peek at developments in flight, housing, culinary arts, and urban life that you will have missed because they never happened. Try out the "latest robots," death rays, cars, and space ships. This site is a blast!

There are a lot of retro transportation sites on the web, but none more comprehensive than **Transportation Futuristics** <lib.berkeley.edu/news\_events/futuristics>. My favorite vehicle on this site is the Curtiss-Wright hovercar, a fifties vision of hot red and yellow steel. Why didn't it ever get to the market? Check out these specs: it had a top speed of fifty mph and gulped twenty gallons of aviation fuel per hour—even when hov-

ering at a red light. At 2.5 mpg, it makes a Hummer look like a Prius!

The mission of the excellent **Retro-Futurismus** <[www.retro-futurismus.de](http://www.retro-futurismus.de)> is to "demonstrate to readers from Germany and Austria the wealth of visionary thinking in these countries during the past." Alas, only the front page has been translated into English, but even those who don't speak German can make use of the links. Of particular interest are the videos culled from YouTube in a variety of languages.

For the very latest from the retro future, click over to the **Paleo-Future blog** <[paleofuture.com](http://paleofuture.com)>, which bills itself as "A look into the future that never was." It's the creation of Matt Novak, who scours the net for items of interest for retro fans. His posts are organized by decade, so you read about the noted Professor Plantamour who in 1873 predicted that Plantamour's Comet would collide with the earth in 2011, or open to *Nevada State Journal* for September 21, 1919, wherein experts predicted that giant airships would someday make the New York to London run in two days, or learn that in 1955 then United States Treasurer Ivy Baker Priest predicted that half of Congress would be female by the year 2000. (Currently there are 441 male members of the U.S. Congress and 92 female).

Without doubt the best site examining the records of SF writers as futurists is the wonderful **Technovelgy.com** <[technovelgy.com](http://technovelgy.com)>, the creation of one Bill Christensen, who, like so many of the unsung heroes of the net, has turned an idiosyncratic passion into an invaluable resource. Technovelgy isn't exactly a retro site, but insofar as Mr. Chris-

tensen has created an index of science fiction inventions and ideas dating as far back as 1634, he has documented our successes and failures more comprehensively than anyone else I know. The site is marvelously useful, with inventions, authors, and novels cross-indexed for easy reference. A warning, however, to my fellow genre typists: click here at your peril. You know that shiny new idea you have for your next magnum opus? Somebody beat you to it!

And if any of you is hankering for the retro apocalypse, grab your laptop, duck and cover under your desk and click over to **Conelrad: All Things Atomic** <[conelrad.com](http://conelrad.com)>. The tribute to the "Golden Age of Homeland Security" is a treasure trove of Cold War culture. Thrill to the Top One Hundred Atomic Films and groove to finger snapping hits ranging from "Agnes (The Teenage Russian Spy)" to "Your Atom Bomb Heart."

exit

After rereading the opening of this column, I imagine that some might misinterpret my position on futurist science fiction. Lest anyone think I am claiming the superiority of my own predictions to those of my betters of the **Golden Age** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Age\\_of\\_Science\\_Fiction](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Age_of_Science_Fiction)>, let the record show that my prognostications have been just as wonky as anyone else's. Most SF practitioners recognize that our stories have sell-by dates and will inevitably be overtaken by events. Which leads me to propose a genre law: (I have always aspired to have a law named after me!):

Kelly's Law: All futures will someday be retro. ○

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# MARYA AND THE PIRATE

Geoffrey A. Landis

**After two years as the Ronald McNair visiting professor of astronautics at MIT, Geoffrey Landis is back at NASA, working on advanced space missions. One such, the Solar Probe Plus, is a mission to send a probe to the outer corona of the Sun. After too long an absence, we are pleased that our resident rocket scientist has found the time to fashion a riveting adventure story about "Marya and the Pirate." More information about Geoff can be found on his website, [www.geoffreylandis.com](http://www.geoffreylandis.com).**

**T**he best-kept secret in the solar system, a sheet of glass nine meters in diameter, was coasting at about twenty kilometers per second on an unpowered trajectory between Venus and Earth. The sheet of glass was unremarkable except that, despite being only a few centimeters thick, it was unusually flat. A thin layer of aluminum vacuum-coated onto the surface made it a nearly perfect mirror.

Domingo Bonaventura, in a small pod barely larger than a coffin, coasted along silently in the shadow of the mirror. He had been coasting for thirty days, periodically making small corrections in the angle of the mirror to insure that it shielded the pod from view from the Earth, and from the many stations and habitats in the cis-Earth space, and likewise that the mirror hid the pod from the view of a precisely calculated point in space. From the viewpoint of an observer anywhere in the Earth-moon system, if any such had happened to point a telescope in his direction, the mirror would reflect only an image of empty space. The infrared emission of the mirror was negligible, and only a phenomenally sensitive detector would show anything other than empty space. Radar, too—if anybody were probing space with radar—would be reflected into empty space.

He had his antennas out, listening for radar, and for radio emissions. There was some modest radio chatter originating from the point of space he was coasting toward: navigation beacons, primarily, and occasional data, most likely engineering-systems status updates. No voice, so far, and he was getting close enough that he would very likely be hearing spillover from a narrow-beam, if there were one. That was good.

Domingo made a tiny adjustment in the mirror angle, checked it, checked it again, and then checked it once more. A little over two hours to go. There was nothing to do, but Domingo had been living in space for two decades: he understood waiting. He folded his legs, placed his hands on his knees, palms up, and, floating freely, cleared his mind of all conscious thought.

For all practical purposes, Domingo Bonaventura was invisible. Which was precisely what he had intended all along.

\* \* \*

Domingo Bonaventura was a tall man, lean, his eyes dark and intense. He was clean shaven, except for a small and neat mustache, but that was not unusual for people who lived and worked in space; any more facial hair would interfere with the seal of an emergency oxygen mask. His one extravagance was his long hair, which floated in tendrils around his head, waving slightly like the arms of an anemone in the faint currents from the air recirculator. The air itself was stale; he had been far too long in quarters far too small, and the entire living area, small as it was, smelled of him. But he was long past noticing, or caring. He floated silent except for his regular breathing, and waited as the laws of physics brought him to his destination.

Two hours later, Domingo opened his eyes. It was time. With slow, economical motions he checked the radio spectrum. No changes in radio signature from the quarry, and no radar pings. Good, and good. As far as he was able to determine, he was still invisible.

He risked a visual, periscoping a camera lens out from behind the shielding effects of the mirror. His target was a glistening white sphere, twenty-five meters in diameter. Zooming the view, he saw attached to it were much smaller aluminum spheres—fuel tanks—and below that, a habitation module.

The hab module was also spherical, with four portholes spaced evenly around the equator, and thermal radiators deployed outward like fins, one to either side. It was a design he was familiar with. There would be blind spots at either end of the module, and also where the radiators blocked the view.

It was the cargo, not the habitat module, that he was interested in. Ten thousand tons of cometary water being shipped to the Earth-orbital colonies using a Venus fly-by. The cargo ship itself had only a small engine, adequate when it was empty, but far too small to accelerate at more than milligees with the full load of load. It could not flee even if it had been warned. Except for fine trajectory correction; it was on a precisely aimed orbit that would take it to the Earth orbital whip, a hundred-kilometer-long rotating orbital station. The whip was little more than a smart rope, but one rotating fast enough that its end would match the speed of the incoming spacecraft, grab it, and swing it in a precisely defined arc that would end up with the cargo in a perfect Earth orbit, and the energy from the ship's original speed banked into the whip's orbital energy, where it would be used to toss the next cargo toward the outer belt. Ten thousand tons of water was a significant treasure. At its intended destination of the inner colonies, it would be used for luxuries and for life support, to grow plants in greenhouse modules and to be electrolyzed into fuel. In the out and out, even a fraction of that much water could be the difference between survival of a colony and starvation.

The distance was closing rapidly. He made a few brief bursts of thruster firings, using cold-exhaust thrusters calculated to have almost no infrared signature. This adjusted his trajectory to bring his course closer to the target and also brought him in along a path where the bulk of the cargo would block any view of his pod from the habitat module.

And it was time. With a swift motion, Domingo hit the controls that blew the three struts that held the mirror to his pod, and fired a short blast on a braking thruster to separate them. The mirror coasted silently on, disappearing into space. Its trajectory was known precisely, and some time months later one of his people would chase it down and pick it up, so it could be used for another job. But for now it had done its work of keeping him invisible, and was unnecessary. He watched it disappear with no particular emotion.

He was committed.

With gentle taps on the pod's braking thrusters, he slowed his course relative to his quarry until his relative motion was only a few centimeters per second. When he was done, the pod coasted to a bump against a cargo-support truss, and a final blast

of the thruster brought it to a full stop. An external glue-gun extruded a bolus of vacuum-solidifying adhesive to tack the pod firmly to the strut; a quick shot of solvent would release it in an instant, if he needed it, but for the moment it would be docked firmly enough to stay in place even if the quarry made an unexpected attitude-adjustment burn.

Domingo suited up, working methodically but with swift practiced motions, checking each seal three times, and counting out the suit drill checklist aloud, even though there was no one to listen. He had already been breathing pure oxygen, so there was no decompression prebreathing time needed, and as soon as he checked his helmet seal, he punched for hatch opening. Pumps compressed the air from the cabin into tanks, saving it not so much for reuse (although reuse was reflexive where Domingo came from, as much a religion as a habit), but mostly to keep the hatch opening from releasing a cloud of oxygen that might signal to hypothetical telescopes that something was amiss. When the cabin pressure dropped to under a torr, he judged that the residual gas would be indistinguishable from normal outgassing of the quarry, and cracked the hatch. He took his tools and pushed off.

The white thermal blankets that kept the cargo cool were brilliant in the sunlight, and the LCD visor of his suit darkened to compensate. Towing his tools, he floated around the spacecraft.

He came around from the polar direction, away from view of the portholes, and aimed his infrared sensor at the closest of the fins to get a reading on how much waste heat was being rejected: 370 Kelvin.

Okay. As expected, the habitat module was live.

Somebody inside was about to have a very bad day.

He clipped his safety tether to a handhold just below the hatch to keep himself from floating away, and inspected it. The hatch was held in with six electromechanical dogs. Explosives would make short work of the hatch, but there was no point in destroying perfectly good hardware. Still staying out of the view of the portholes, and being careful not to make even the slightest jar against the habitat, he found the right spot and cut through the outer skin with a micro-torch, revealing color-coded wiring below. It was a standard design that he knew well. He shorted the two outermost wires, disabling the automated interlocks, and then clipped the next pair, bypassing the computer control.

There was no point in conserving oxygen at this point. He had to just hope no distant observers were looking in this precise direction at this precise instant. He checked his tether, and then selected two guns out of his tool pack. One he slung around his shoulders where it would be in easy reach, and the other, a glue-tipped harpoon gun, he held in his left hand. In his right hand he gripped a body-bag.

Domingo positioned himself out of the way, feet hooked against an edge of the thermal radiator. He counted silently down from five to calm his mind, and on zero he put forty volts across the two innermost wires: release.

The hatch blew.

The atmosphere expanded out in a silent spray, flashing instantly into ice crystals that glittered in the sun. Loose papers, hand tools, and some unidentifiable containers and other bits of debris flew by him, spinning into space. He ignored them, watching intently for a body entrained in the outrushing atmosphere.

Within a second, the outrush of atmosphere was complete. A few final bits of debris floated out of the hatch.

No body.

Time was critical. He pushed off from the habitat, hard, relying on the tether line to swing him around and then letting his momentum carry him through the open hatch without slowing. As he entered into the habitat his eyes searched left, right,

upward, downward, seeking the body that had to be there, probably already unconscious from the shock of explosive depressurization.

No body.

In a single motion he flipped over and checked his motion, simultaneously releasing the body bag and unslinging the second gun. There were two suits racked in a niche to the side of the open hatch, one bright blue, one crimson. The suit to the right, the crimson one, was empty. On the blue suit to the left, however, although he could not see a face in the helmet, the indicator lights on the status display at the collar were green, green, green.

He raised both guns. In his earphones, he could hear the almost inaudible sounds of electronic handshaking as the microprocessor in his suit negotiated frequency. And then, very slowly, the arms of the blue spacesuit raised above its head. In his earphones, a soft voice: "Don't shoot. I surrender."

A girl's voice.

He brought the gun to bear, and fired two short bursts, one into the faceplate of the helmet, the second into the suit. It was the right gun, the glue harpoon, and he had it set in the glue-only mode. The streamer of glue congealed almost instantly in vacuum, obscuring the faceplate and restricting the figure's freedom of movement. Domingo tapped his receiver off before he could hear any protests from the captive. Two more short bursts tacked down the captive's hands, just in case there was a weapon within reach.

According to the timer in his display, elapsed time from the moment he had blown the exterior hatch was just under four seconds.

The tangle of glue held the space-suited figure blind and immobile, the suit arms spread-eagled awkwardly and glued to the bulkhead. Domingo kept a small portion of his attention on the captive as he reset the hatch electronics, closed the hatch and reset the interlocks, and brought the habitat back up to full atmosphere. It took five minutes before his gauges all showed green, and in that time he did a quick check of the systems, verifying that everything was nominal, and that no messages had been received suggesting that anybody outside had seen something unusual. He paused for a moment, considering, and then removed his helmet and pulled off his gloves. It felt good to be breathing unconfined air again. The cabin air had the cold and dry tank-air feel of recent repressurization, with almost a metallic smell.

With the cabin back to pressure, it was time for him to deal with his captive. He examined the suit. The glue held it firmly immobile, and a large spatter of dark gray glue covered the visor of the helmet. A neatly block-lettered label, written in dark marker on the suit's hardshell carapace, said "May." His captive's name, presumably. First or last?

He had already put the glue harpoon down. He kept the other gun in his left hand, a little railgun that shot a tiny loop of wire at hypersonic velocity. It had almost no recoil—an important feature for a gun used in microgravity—and while the wireloop projectile would easily shred flesh, it wouldn't penetrate pressure walls.

He found the solvent spray in his tool pack, brought it out, and sprayed it over the glob of glue covering over his captive's helmet. He popped the quick-release flanges and gave it a quarter twist, still one-handed, and pulled the helmet away.

"Thanks," she said. She shook her head, dirty blonde hair swinging left and right, and then sneezed once.

This was the first look he'd gotten at her face. Buddha. How old was she, eighteen? Certainly no more than twenty, at the maximum.

She looked down at the gun he still held in his left hand, and then up again at his face. Was she actually smiling? "You don't need that," she said. "I already told you; I surrender. I'm ready to do whatever you tell me to. I won't go back on my word."

She wasn't about to do anything just then; both her hands and her torso were still

glued to the walls. He looked at her, and then lowered the gun, not letting it go, but at least aiming away to the side.

"So you said," he said. "But should I trust you?"

She looked at him. Her gaze was disconcertingly direct. "I don't know," she said. "Should you?"

He laughed, without actual humor. "No," he said. "I don't think I should."

He paused, and then said, "You were suited up when I blew the hatch. Why?"

"I felt a jar in the spacecraft," she said. "Indicators didn't show anything, but I thought some of the cargo might be venting, thought I'd take a look." She paused, and said, "That must have been you docking, I take it."

Domingo considered. That was plausible, although she must have been extremely sensitive to notice the tiny bump as he docked against the much larger cargo ship, since large spacecraft sometimes shudder erratically from thermal expansion waves created when parts move into or out of sunlight. It was hard to believe that a girl as young as she was could have enough experience in space to be able to tell the slight bump of his docking from normal quivering of the ship. And she was fast—it had been less than five minutes from his docking to blowing the hatch. On the other hand, the Venus to Earth transfer was long and boring, and she very likely had been hoping for something, anything, to do, to break the monotony.

"And what about you?" she said. "You blew the hatch, just like that? Not ever worrying about who might be inside? No warning at all? I know that pirates aren't supposed to be very nice, but killing people without warning is a little extreme."

"I don't think you're in much of a position to ask questions," he said.

She shrugged, or did as much of a shrug as her limited range of motion allowed. "So, if you're planning to shoot me, you would have done it already."

He laughed, this time with real amusement. "Point," he said. He jerked his head at the body-bag, an emergency-orange sack now floating unattended near the pilot's console. "If there was somebody, I was ready to bag and repressurize them."

The body bags were standard pieces of emergency equipment, human-sized airtight fabric bags with a small cylinder of compressed oxygen. In the case of an explosive depressurization, an unsuited crewman could, in principle, crawl into one, seal it, pull the quick-tab to inflate it, and wait for rescue. Or a vacuum-suited comrade could snag non-suited personnel and jam them into a bag. They were last-gasp desperation equipment for serious emergencies—something that might save your life, not something you'd ever want to try out.

She looked at him. "You really think you could find somebody, stuff them into a bag, and get them repressurized inside of sixty seconds?"

He nodded. "Yep. In drills, I'm under fifteen seconds."

"I don't believe it," she said.

"We practice," he said. "We drill. A lot."

"Yeah, but with real, living people, not dummies? I don't think so."

He looked at her steadily. "We practice with real people."

She shuddered. "God. You guys really are crazy."

Domingo looked at her. It was a tough universe out there. How could they not practice? "Maybe in the cozy, rich worlds you live in," he said, speaking slowly and contemptuously, "maybe you didn't practice decompression drills. Maybe you're rich enough that you never have blowouts. I suppose everything's triple-redundant in the habitats you live in. You don't know what it's like. I guess you've never seen a blowout, never seen metal walls rip like potato chips under the pressure of escaping atmosphere, never seen your friends and family exposed to vacuum and known that anybody that you can't chase down and cram into a bag in sixty seconds or less is somebody you'll never again see alive."

He was getting angry now. "Well, girl, I'm not you. I don't live in that world. I live in the out and out, where things don't always work, where blowouts can happen any day, any night, and there's nobody else to rely on. Damn right we practice. Damn right we practice with real people.

"You say you can't get somebody into a bag inside of ten seconds flat, seal the bag, and be looking for the next one in fifteen? Girl, I wouldn't even want you in the out and out. You'd die in a week, and I'd call it lucky if you didn't take somebody with you when you go."

"Oh," she said, in a very small voice. "Okay. I believe you."

His burst of rage had passed now, and he felt empty. And thinking about seeing his friends die—because, one time, there were too many to save—he had little inclination to add another body to the universe's death toll. The universe was harsh enough. It might be acceptable if somebody died in the course of an operation; that was something you had to accept, but it was another thing to kill somebody in cold blood. "No, I probably shouldn't trust you," he said. "But I will."

"Thank you," she said, still in a small soft voice.

He raised the solvent to release the glue holding her, but she shook her head, and said, "It's okay, I got it."

She squirmed a little, and the tips of the fingers of one hand came poking out of her suit, under her chin. She must have silently worked the arm loose from the glove and sleeve, and pulled it into the torso of the suit while he was checking the ship, leaving the suit arm that he'd glued to the bulkhead only an empty shell. The suit was slightly large for her, and the neck flange had just enough extra room that she could twist around and snake her arm out through the neck. Once she had her arm out to the shoulder, she reached down and carefully unsnapped the side latches on the hardshell chest segment, popped it free, and wriggled out into the cabin.

Under the suit, she was wearing underwear and nothing else. He made his face rigid to hide a smile. She really had suited up in a hurry, he realized, skipping the suit liner and the entire thermal control subsystem fittings. No wonder she'd gotten the suit on so quickly.

She reached out one hand. "Solvent," she said, apparently paying no attention to the fact that she was nearly naked, while he was bundled in a full vacuum suit, carrying a gun in one hand and a spray solvent can in the other.

He tossed her the solvent, momentarily wondering if she could possibly be daring enough to try to spray him in the eyes and hope to grab his gun, but she turned to spray at the glue holding her suit in small, neat squirts, the minimum amount of spray needed to peel away the glue. Her back to him, she did a quick inspection of the seals, carefully making sure that no errant glue blobs might interfere with any of the fit, and then put the suit in its place on the rack behind it and plugged the electrical cables and air line into it to recharge it for the next use.

He nodded to himself approvingly. With instincts like that, she might have some chance of survival in the out and out after all.

While she had her back turned, he took the opportunity to do a visual inspection. The little she was wearing made it pretty easy to see that she had no place to hide a weapon.

She turned back to him, catching him looking her over. "Now what?" she said, holding his gaze directly with hers.

He averted his eyes slightly away from her body. "Now, what do you think?"

"I don't know," she said. "You have the upper hand; I expect that I'm going to do whatever you say I should do."

"In that case, I'd say that right now you might want to put on some more clothes."

Her eyebrows raised a tiny fraction of a millimeter, but she nodded and said, "Okay."

Buddha, all this time had she been thinking he was planning to rape her? What



kind of a barbarian did she think he was? His Anteros crew weren't pirates because they liked to pillage and rape; they were pirates because they had no choice. Could she not know that?

She pushed off to coast across the cabin. The main cabin was partitioned off, with six niches spaced evenly around the circumference. Other than the one that held the spacesuits, two of these were apparently storage, and two others served as a small galley and a head. The one opposite, to which she was heading, was apparently fitted out as a sleeping cubby. He pushed off behind her, and she looked back and down at him. "You're following me?" she said.

Buddha! Was she *still* thinking he was about to rape her? She caught herself on the wall rail outside the cubby's door and stopped her motion; an instant later he braked himself to a spot next to her against the same rail.

"One moment, please," he said, and slid past her. He looked back. "If you don't mind, stay where I can see you."

He kept one eye on her attuned to any unexpected motion, but the only movement she made was to occasionally touch a fingertip to the wall rail to keep herself from drifting. Domingo searched the sleeping cubby quickly but efficiently. It had a zippered mesh hammock tethered against the inner wall, and a number of cabinets, each of which he checked out. They were full of various pieces of loose-fitting one-piece ship's wear, a little more colorful than what he'd been used to, a lot of it decorated with whimsical horses and other animals. The cubby and the clothing both had a distinct scent of girl, not an unpleasant odor, but rather something that reminded him of other times, other places. He checked through it all, moving from the neatly folded clothing to the dirty laundry and then to towels and bathroom supplies. He caught her slight grin when he found her supply of tampons, but he kept searching, trying to keep his inspection pointedly disinterested. Clearly she wasn't using the drugs to suppress menarche, but her medical regimen was no business of his, and he was not so young as to be either shocked or titillated by indications of feminine biology. Here with her personal things would be a good place to hide a gun, if she had one, and he took extra care to make sure that he searched it thoroughly, without any loss of focus. After he finished, he floated out, saying "Okay. You can go in now."

She gave him a look of disgust, and pulled herself in. He expected that she would have founiced, if there'd been any way to do so in microgravity. "You sure made a mess," she said.

"No problem," he said, and then, as she started to peel off her underwear, said, "you can go ahead and close the door if you like."

"Thanks," she said, and did so. He took the time to do a quick search through the other compartments of the ship.

Through the door, she said, "Are you bringing the rest of your crew in? Or will they just wait in your ship?"

Ah—she thought he had a whole ship, and that he was just making excuses to be alone with her. "Oh, my ship," he said. "No, they're already gone. They, ah, dropped me off, and went on to the next target already."

"Oh." She paused. "I don't understand. You're not here to take the cargo?"

"Well, something like that, yes." He was, in fact, intending to ride with the cargo, at least as far as the orbital whip. Once he got to the whip, though, he had other plans.

"So," her voice came out to him, chatting just as lightly as if he were nothing more than another shipmate, "how did you manage to make your ship invisible, anyway?"

"Trade secret," he said. "Sorry."

He finished his quick search of the cabin. It was still possible that a weapon might be hidden deeper in the systems, under panels or inside electronics enclosures, but he judged it unlikely. If she had been tipped off about piracy, despite all his precau-



tions, a weapon would have been out for ready use, not buried away deep. And if she hadn't been tipped off, there would be no weapons at all; space ships were not normally armed.

He hadn't expected anything, actually, but now that he had verified that nothing was in easy reach, he relaxed very slightly. The ship was still full of weapons, of course—in space, a thousand things ranging from oxygen cylinders to power lines would be deadly, if used right—but he knew what to watch for.

When she emerged from the sleep cubby, she was wearing a one-piece ship-suit, a thin jumper in an innocent light blue, tight enough to keep from having loose cloth snag on protrusions, but loose enough to hide most of her curves. He'd already seen her, though, and could easily enough visualize what was underneath.

"Perhaps," he said, "you would be so good as to tell me your name."

"May," she said, and then, after a pause, "May Hamilton."

"May," he repeated. "You work for Hayes Minerals, I take it."

"Of course," she said. "And may I also ask who you are? Or is that a secret?"

"I am Domingo Bonaventura," he said. "Of Anteros colony."

Her eyes widened slightly. "Oh," she said. It was likely that she'd already heard of his name. Lies, probably—stories got around, and were usually distorted and exaggerated in the telling—but he hoped that, at least, the stories she'd heard hadn't made him seem too cruel.

Her eyes drifted down to the gun, which he'd stuck with Velcro to his thigh. It was still in easy reach, although no longer in his hand. He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"A projectile gun?" she said. "I don't think you'd use it. Not inside a pressurized cabin."

He smiled. "Think not? Think again. We're not amateurs, you know. The weapon is carefully designed. It won't penetrate a cabin. Shred flesh, yes indeed; you can bet that I would make a mess of anybody I shoot. But it won't depressurize the cabin. Better not count on me hesitating. If I need to use it, I won't."

"Oh."

Was she disappointed? He couldn't say. For all he could tell, she was just making conversation.

"But I'll offer you a deal," he said. "You will promise not to try to hurt me, or try to escape or call for rescue or make any kind of secret signal. If I ask you to do something, you'll do it. Fair?"

"A deal?" she said. "So, what's your half of the deal? That you won't kill me?"

"My half of the deal," he said, "is that I will trust you."

"You'll trust me?" she said.

"To a limited extent. When I say I'll trust you, that means I won't tie you up with electrical cables, cover the whole bundle with glue until you can't move a centimeter, and stuff you into a cargo hold until we reach a spot where I can put you and a locator beacon into a body bag and eject you in the general direction of somebody who might be able to pick you up. Which is what I will do if I decide I can't trust you. Fair?"

"Sounds fair to me," she said. "And when we get to the whip?"

"You'll be free to go."

"You're going to subvert the whip," she said. It wasn't a question.

Domingo smiled. He was really beginning to like her.

"You're not planning to brake into Earth orbit," she said. "Of course not, why would you? You're going to ride the whip, but you're going to use it to grab the cargo and toss it into another orbit, somewhere in the outer belt. You have a trajectory all planned, I bet you do. Your destination is the out and out. That's why your ship didn't stay; you don't need a ship. You're not just pirating a little bit of water, you're taking the whole cargo."

"You seem to be telling me my plan," Domingo said. "Since you seem to know it all, please, go on."

"So you're not stopping at Earth orbit at all, are you? And what about me? You say you'll let me go? So what do you mean by that?"

"I have a pod."

"A pod. You're going to drop me in a pod?"

"Crude," Domingo said, "But I personally guarantee that it's functional. Are you objecting to the deal?"

"No," she said. "I understand. If a pod is what you've got, I'll take it." She paused for a moment, and then added, "Thanks."

"In that case, if you're done asking questions?" Domingo said. "As long as you ask me before you go near the communications console, please feel free to go about your life."

"Thank you."

He tilted his head ironically.

"No, really, I mean it," she said. "The cargo's insured. You could have—" she paused. "You could have been a lot worse."

"So," Domingo said. "You're welcome."

Domingo went to the control console and made a show of checking out systems, ostentatiously pretending to be paying no particular attention to her. He really did need to check out the ship and familiarize himself with its controls; when they got to the whip, he would need to do some rapid manual maneuvering. He had three days to become completely familiar with the control systems, and there would be no margin for error on maneuvers that would have to be done with perfect timing and no computer control. When he was done, he made sure that the ship was set to answer routine traffic control queries with an automatic "systems nominal" response.

She, for her part, kept well clear of him, drifting over to a spot near her sleep-cubby to read a book. He wondered if she was really reading, or if she were pretending just as much as he was.

He did trust her, to a limited extent, but he nevertheless remained wary. He wasn't trusting enough to allow himself to fall asleep with her free in the cabin. He knew how to sleep in a spaceman's cat nap, with part of his attention always aware, still listening for anomalies and ready to break into full consciousness in an instant, but he wasn't quite willing to trust to his reflexes. He inspected the door to the sleep cubby, but it was little more than painted paper; there was no real way to lock anybody inside. After some thinking, when the evening came according to ship's time, he had her get in her suit again, and he carefully glued it immobile. He left her visor up, so she could breathe ship's air.

She seemed remarkably patient about the process, watching him with a slight grin on her face.

He finished up by gluing the helmet down to the hardshell carapace to make sure she wouldn't be able to do her trick of sliding an arm out. Sleeping in the suit would be comfortable enough; he'd done it many times. In free-fall, she would be floating loose inside, and sleeping inside the suit would be no different than inside a mesh hammock.

"Everything okay?" he said. "Nothing binding?"

"No complaints," she said.

"Sorry for the indignity," he said. "It's not that I don't trust you."

"—but you don't trust me," she said. "I understand. No problem. Good night."

And she closed her eyes.

After he had awakened in the morning and used the small head and then gone into the small freefall shower facility to clean up, she was still asleep. Domingo

watched her face for a little while, soft and unlined, with wisps of hair straying out from the helmet, and then went to the galley, which was quite well appointed for its compact size. He was pleasantly surprised to see that it had a pressure-percolator to brew up coffee, something that was an expensive luxury in the belt. Hayes apparently thought a lot of their employees. Then he went back to her. He left the suit glued to the bulkhead, but unsealed the chest and the helmet, pulling them away as a single piece. Her eyes opened sleepily just as soon as he started unfastening the dogs.

"Good morning," he said. "Arise, arise, a new day dawns."

She tried to suppress a yawn. "So soon? What time is it?"

"Soon?" he said. "It's been five hours. How long did you plan to sleep?"

"Longer than that," she complained. "God. I'm going to need a nap."

"As you like. There's coffee, if you want some."

"God yes," she said.

Domingo had two cups squirted out of the brewer and waiting for her by the time she'd finished with the head. The cups were designed for use in either freefall or gravity, with a mesh latticework of ceramic that held the liquid in place by surface tension and yet allowed the coffee to be sipped slowly. He raised his cup to the small Buddha statue he'd installed on the bulkhead opposite, lowered his eyes for a moment, and then drank. Symbolically, raising the cup counted as making an offering to the Buddha. If the Buddha actually wanted to drink, he was free to come over and have a fresh cup squirted out for him; there was no point in actually wasting real coffee on symbolism.

May followed his eyes and noticed the Buddha statue. "God," she said. "Or, I mean, Gods. You don't actually believe in that stuff, do you?"

Domingo sipped his coffee and considered. "No, not exactly. The rituals instill a certain amount of discipline that I like to encourage my people to follow, and I observe the forms, so as to not give them any temptation to slack off. But if you mean, do I believe a three-thousand-year-old dead Indian guy is watching over us from the great beyond, I'll reserve judgment on that until I see him."

"Your people?" she said. "You mean, you have followers who believe whatever you tell them to?"

"We're a pretty anarchic group," he said, "but, yes, to some extent, my people tend to look at what I'm doing."

She wrinkled her forehead. "So, pirates are Buddhist? I wouldn't have believed it."

"We don't like to be called pirates, if you don't mind," he said.

"Really? So what do you call coming on board a cargo ship with a gun and hijacking the cargo to god-knows-where?"

"I would," he said, "call it survival."

Over the next few days they fell into a routine. Space travel is boring, and there was only so much time that could be filled in by practicing with the control systems and making sure he was ready. He was accustomed to spending the long blank hours in space by sitting in meditation—floating in meditation, really—but, even though he'd more or less come to trust her, he didn't want to give her a temptation to surprise him with something that would compel him to respond with force. He spent much of the time inspecting the ship, making some minor adjustments to fittings, verifying that back-up systems were operational and ready to use, cleaning the filters, and recalibrating a few instruments that had drifted slightly. It was busywork, mostly, but he liked to have a ship in which he knew every component by having worked with it.

"I'm not used to company," he said, when he found her floating in the cabin, not really doing anything, just watching him as he took apart a fan motor to repack a bearing. The fan had been making a slight hum. "It's a little disconcerting."

"What about your crew?" she said.

"Crew?"

"Your ship."

"Oh, that," he said. "I misled you a little on that. No back-up. Just me."

"Oh," she said, working it out. "The pod. Of course. You didn't even have a ship, did you? No wonder your ship could be invisible; it doesn't even exist. A pod. All you ever had was a pod. You floated, God knows how far, all alone? Don't you get lonely?"

"No."

"Don't you want companionship? Do you spend all your time like that, out in the deep, all alone?"

"Well, I'm not alone all the time. I was married at sixteen." When she looked at him with what seemed to be surprise, he said, "In the out and out, we tend to get married early."

"Oh," she said. "So, is she nice, your wife?"

"The best. Competent, intelligent, hard as vanadium steel. The kind of person you want at your side prospecting."

"You used to be a prospector?"

"Of course. We didn't set out to be pirates, you know."

After a pause, she said, "So, where is she now? Waiting for you back at Anteros?"

"She died."

May waited for more, and when no more was forthcoming, she said "That's it? She died? Nothing more?"

"Of course there's more. I don't think I'll tell it." Domingo paused, and then said, "If I started to tell you about her I expect I wouldn't stop, not for a week and a day, and then maybe another week. And if we had a couple of liters of good distillation, and if we weren't enemies, and if we weren't on a spaceship, and if people weren't depending on me, and if I didn't have a hijacked cargo to fly to the right place at the right time, maybe you could talk me into telling it to you. But we don't, and I won't. And it's not your business anyway."

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

One day out from Earth approach, and Domingo decided it was past time that he went out to inspect the cargo. He suited up, and had her suit up with him, partly because she knew the ship and would save him some time, and partly because he wasn't ready to trust her alone in the cabin.

The cargo was, in essence, an enormous sack of water, and in the openings between the mesh the flexible material bulged out, like a balloon held in a fishnet. He did a fly-around to inspect it, verifying that there were no discontinuities in the webbing, checking the interior pressure and verifying that the temperature and pressure monitors were all well seated. At the temperatures of the Venus trajectory, the water was liquid, but the reflective thermal blanket kept it from heating up too much and building up a dangerous pressure.

The main part of his inspection was the high-strength cables that secured the bag. In freefall, they were under no stress, but when cargo would be grabbed by the orbital whip, the cables would be suddenly under tension. He wanted to verify that the cargo wouldn't rip free.

"I already checked those," May's voice said, over the suit-to-suit. She was floating in her sky-blue suit about five meters away. He'd instructed her to stay clear of the cargo but to remain in sight; and he'd locked her suit radio so it would broadcast only on low-power mode, enough to communicate with him, but not to broadcast a distress signal.

"Good," he said. "I'll still check it myself, though, if you don't mind." He did his fly-around in silence for a few moments, and then added casually, almost as if talking to

himself, "I saw an accident, once, where a sack of water worth seventy million ripped open into vacuum because the mining company shepherding it had been in a hurry, and skipped the cable inspection before they put their cargo under acceleration."

That was back before Anteros went rogue, when they were still working on contract, still trying to scratch out a hard living on the far edge of the sky. The blowout had sprayed glistening snowflakes across the black, the water evaporating and also freezing at the same time. The ship Domingo had been in was coated with snow to a thickness of several meters on the side that had faced the blowout. In the parts of the ship that were in shadow, the snow had persisted for almost a week before slowly sublimating away. Although the accident had claimed no lives, it had still been a disaster for the mining company, which had been too deeply in debt to be able to survive the loss of cargo. It had been one more failure in the long slow chain of events that brought the Anteros colony to the brink of bankruptcy.

When Domingo finished inspecting the cargo retention cables, which (just as she had said) had no evident flaws, he went over to where he'd glued his pod to a truss. He gave it a visual inspection, no problems, and then did a remote systems boot. Everything checked out as normal, so he unglued it and moved it around to a position near the hatch of the hab module.

"You crossed over to here in that?" May's voice said. "Kind of small, isn't it?"

"Sufficient for the job," he said.

"How long were you in that?"

"Sorry; trade secret."

"Must have been at least a couple of weeks, I'd reckon," she said. "Some kind of ship must have dropped you into the transfer orbit, but if anything had ever been nearby, I should have seen it."

"You can make that assumption, if you like," he said.

When they returned to the ship, there was an incoming message waiting.

"Venus cargo, this is Interplanetary control, come in please. We have an off-nominal here. Venus cargo, come in please."

All of Domingo's senses ratcheted up to full alert. He was, in fact, slightly off the expected trajectory, but in a deviation that had been carefully calibrated to be not far enough off the nominal path to rate a query from traffic control. He looked at May. She seemed as surprised as he was; she looked back at him, and shook her head slightly. He shrugged and sent out a response.

"Traffic control, this is Cargo Hayes VE-seven. What's up?"

After the light-delay pause, he heard, "Listen, seven, we have a problem on this end. Hohmann whip is down. Repeat, Hohmann whip is down. Do you copy?"

May whistled softly, and floated over toward the other console. Domingo cursed under his breath. The whip out of business! "Roger, we copy," he said. "Negative on the whip. Can you list us the abort modes?"

After the delay, the voice said, "Hold on, seven. Things are pretty confused around here. I think you're on your own, though." The voice was a young man's. He seemed somewhat rattled.

It must be bad out there. "What happened?"

"Not sure yet. There was a major structural failure near the 70 percent mark; several cables broken, a lot of people lost. We think we must have had an impact, don't know yet by what."

"How extensive is the damage?" Domingo held his breath, waiting for the response.

"It's bad. We're definitely off-line. Some people got flung into orbit. We're trying to organize chase parties to get them before they hit the atmosphere. Listen, can we chat later? There's a lot going on here, and we don't have time to waste. Information

should be coming your way over the datanet. I just thought you ought to hear about this as soon as possible."

"Roger," he said

"Traffic out."

May was already at the copilot's station, reading through the datastream that was coming in. Domingo scrolled down through menu screens to bring up the external sensors. They were closing in on final approach now, well inside the moon's orbit, close enough that the external cameras should be able to make out the hundred-kilometer whip.

It wasn't there.

He looked harder, brightening the image until the disk of the Earth was almost completely washed out, and zeroed in on the little asteroid that served as the counterweight to the whip. By enhancing gamma factor and the contrast, he could see a tiny stub protruding out of it.

The whip was gone.

Around the asteroid and the little stub of the whip, there was a fog of white speckles. Debris, he realized. Something pretty bad had happened there. Some of those specks were space-suited figures—at least, he hoped they were suited—flung off into eccentric orbits by the disaster.

This was going to be a problem.

He jerked his head up, suddenly worried that that he'd let his attention drift. He saw that May was scrolling through trajectory documents with a frown.

She looked up at him. "We're intercepting atmosphere."

"What?"

"My ship. My cargo. We need that catch. We're on a trajectory that takes us into atmosphere."

It took him a moment to think what she was talking about. He hadn't yet extrapolated their path past the whip. He pictured it in his head. She was right. He'd made some trajectory modifications to position him for a later maneuver. Small adjustments, well within the error bands, but now, without the catch, the trajectory would intercept the Earth.

"The whip is down," he said. "We're not getting the catch. We'll need a main-engine burn to avoid entry."

She looked at him, her eyes cold. "Not possible," she said.

"I know, not enough delta-V. We'll have to vent cargo, to lower our mass. Sorry about the cargo, girl, but we don't have a lot of choices here."

"We don't have any choices here. We have no main engine."

"Of course you have a main engine," he said. "I know this model."

"We don't need a main engine for Hohmann transfers; the whips and the tugs do all the heavy delta-V. All we need is the trajectory control."

"You're flying a Hohmann trajectory without an engine?"

"Why not?" she said. "You checked everything else. Twice. It never occurred to you to check the main engine?"

"You don't have an engine?" he repeated. "Why don't you have an engine?"

In a very small voice, she said, "I can't afford the fuel. I can't afford the overhaul. I can't even afford this trip, really, except that it's all done with borrowed money."

"You've got to be crazy—I mean, Hayes mining has to be crazy. You can't fly without a main engine. That's a single-point failure mode."

She answered him very slowly. "We're flat broke. We're deep in debt just mining this cargo in the first place. And this was supposed to be a simple toss-and-catch. How the hell could I know that the whip was going to be down?"

"Girl, you have to plan for problems. That's how you survive." He looked at her. "I think I want to look at those trajectories again."

They both examined the trajectories. They were now so deep into the Earth's gravity well that it was going to take some significant delta-V to make any noticeable change in their path. Their trajectory would just miss the planet, but the heating from entering the atmosphere at a speed of twelve kilometers per second would be catastrophic.

In just nine hours, the ship would make a spectacular fireball.

They were going to need help. Domingo picked up the microphone to broadcast a distress call, and then hesitated. Any rescue would put him in a rather tricky situation—his whole plan had assumed he would flee to the out and out, to the region of space where the near-Earth laws didn't reach. But he didn't seem to have much choice about it. He'd have to deal with the situation as it played out. He keyed the mike.

"This is Cargo Hayes VE-seven," Domingo said. "We are declaring a spacecraft emergency. This is Hayes VE-seven, en route from Venus to the Hohmann whip, we have an emergency. We are," he paused, and then said, "out of fuel. We are requesting help. Repeat, Hayes VE-seven requesting help. Anybody out there?"

Over the next half hour, responses trickled in, first from traffic control, a curt acknowledgment of the distress call with no promises of aid, and then from other cis-lunar ships and habitats. But, no matter how desperate the situation, there were simply no ships near enough in orbital space that even a full burn could get to them before they hit atmosphere.

Their speed was increasing, slowly but mathematically, as they approached the Earth.

"Okay," May said. "Suppose we drill a hole in the side of the cargo. The water will come spraying out. Not much thrust, I know, but maybe enough to avoid hitting the atmosphere?"

Domingo shook his head. "Not enough pressure," he said. "You won't get significant thrust." He paused, and then said, "But don't rely on me. Check it out, see if I'm not wrong."

In ten minutes of checking calculations and looking up values for the thermal constants of water, May said, "Damn. Any way I do it, looks like you're right. Adiabatic expansion cools the water too much." Domingo looked up. "At best we might get a few meters a second, but that's not nearly enough. But, wait, what if we cut away the thermal blanket? Let the cargo heat up in the sun, and build up pressure?"

Domingo shook his head. "Too much thermal mass. It won't heat enough in the time we have. Not even close, I'm afraid."

"Damn."

They looked at each other. "We're in bad trouble," May said. "What do we do?"

Domingo had only one asset left, the pod. It only had a tiny amount of delta-V. Not enough to save them both, but if there were only one person in it, it might be just enough to let him get away. But he would have to leave quickly; the sooner he left, the more of a chance he'd have.

He had no reason to stay. It was her bad luck, not his.

He looked at her. She was looking back at him, her face open and vulnerable. "We have nine hours," he said, and smiled. "We'd better enjoy them."

She looked at him, her stare intense and direct, and ran her eyes along his body, from his head to his toes. "You have the gun," she said, "and I gave you my word that I'd do whatever you asked me. Well, looks like I lied to you. I'm not," she said, "going to go to bed with a man who's holding a gun on me. You can damn well shoot me first."

He glanced down to where the gun was still velcroed to his thigh. He had never forgotten it was there, of course, but he hadn't really thought about it much; it was just part of his clothing. He pulled it free, looked at it, and opened his hand and pushed it away from him. They both watched it. It drifted slowly across the cabin,



bounced gently off an air-circulation diffuser on the opposite bulkhead, and then floated in place, spinning slightly.

She raised one hand to the back of her head, rubbing her neck and fanning her hair out in all directions, and then she pushed off from the deck, coasting across the few meters between them, and braked her motion with a hand on his chest.

It was the first time she'd touched him. She stabilized herself in place with one hand grasping the cloth on the front of his jumpsuit, rotated herself until she was oriented with her head pointing the same direction as his head, her toes the same direction as his toes, and looked him directly in the eyes.

With the other hand, she slapped him, hard.

"That's for wrecking my ship," she said. "And stealing my cargo."

He released his hold on the railing, and brought up one hand to rub his cheek. The motion set them drifting slightly, away from the piloting console and toward the center of the plenum. She could have shoved away from him, but she remained holding his jumpsuit, breathing hard, staring at him as if daring him to hit her back.

"Sorry," he said.

"And you didn't have to glue me into the spacesuit at night, either," she said. "That was demeaning."

"Sorry," he said again, unable to think of anything else to say.

"That was mean." She reached out to grab his hair with her free hand, and pulled herself up to bring her face right up against his, nose to nose, staring unblinkingly into his eyes. "And you treat me like a kid."

Her eyes were hazel, he noticed, almost green.

"I'm not a kid," she said.

"I know," he said. He could feel the puffs of her shallow breaths on his face.

"Well, you shouldn't treat me like one," she said.

They were floating freely in the center of the plenum now, and he could feel the electrical tension of her body. Her face was inches away from his. Very slowly, not sure how she was going to react, he reached his arms out and wrapped them around her. The muscles of her shoulders were tense.

She pulled his face to her and kissed him. Her kiss was as unexpected and as forceful as her slap had been.

"Nine hours?" she said.

"More like eight, now," he said.

He took his time undressing her. Her body was as he remembered it, but this time he did not pretend to look away. Her pubic hair was a delicate light brown, the color of Martian quartz.

He led her into the sleeping cubby, so they could use the mesh hammock to hold them together, to counter the tendency for any action to push them apart. The first time he entered her, he was rough and rather hasty. She held him tightly to her, matching each of his motions, matching his urgency with an urgency of her own.

When he was done, she explored his body with her fingertips, running her hands over a set of scars from an old mining accident, another set of scars that marked where he'd been shot with a railgun.

The second time he went slowly, taking his time.

Somewhat later, he was floating languidly in the sleeping hammock, mulling the properties of water in microgravity. He opened his eyes when she disentangled herself from the sleeping hammock, and from him. She didn't bother to put on clothes, but kicked off across the cabin.

He watched her, admiring the play of her muscles as her nude form coasted across the empty space, flipped over and expertly checked her motion, and watched her as

she retrieved his gun from where it was floating. He wondered what she was thinking.

"You might want to check it," he said, "before you make any threats."

She looked at the gun, and in a moment found the release that opened the chamber holding the wireloop projectiles. It was empty. So was the gun's battery compartment. "I don't believe it," she said. "All this time, you've been carrying an empty gun?"

"I took the ammunition and the battery out after the first day, when I decided to trust you." He looked at her. "Was I wrong?"

She looked at him steadily, and then sighed. "No. I was just checking it."

"Then, get ready to suit up," he said.

"Put on clothes?" she said. "Why? I think you've seen what there is to see already."

"No," he said. "Not clothes. Suits. We had our fun, and now, I regret, it's time we get serious. We have work to do. We have seven hours. Just enough time left to save our lives."

When they exited the hatch, the Earth was a blue half-sphere, looming in the sky. It seemed to be growing even as he watched, but he knew that this had to be an optical illusion. Around it he could see a cloud of glittering specks of dust—Earth's coterie of orbital habitats and captive asteroids. Only the largest and the closest of these showed as more than pinpricks of light; most of them were too small to resolve. The asteroid with the stub of the broken whip was out of sight, well around the edge of the planet.

But they had no time to sightsee. He tore his gaze away and brought it down to the cargo.

"We need to find the pressure release valve," he said. "We need to direct the spray directly onto the habitat module."

It was a delicate operation. When they opened the pressure valve, the water in the cargo sphere burst out in a exuberant spray, instantly flashing into vapor, an expanding cloud of glittering white. It was hard to collimate the stream and direct it onto the habitat. The water boiled, cooling as it released energy, and froze as it boiled and cooled. They played the stream of boiling ice onto the habitat's surface. At first nothing would stick; the walls of the habitat module were warmed by the sun, and the ice sublimated away as fast as they could spray it on. They worked in a transient fog of vapor, the habitat module visible only as a dim shape. But after a minute, the exterior walls began to cool down, and a thin layer of ice started to form. It was tedious work. The ice fog tended to blow some of the ice toward their helmets, and they had to clear the ice from their own suit visors every few minutes.

Ever so slowly, the shell of ice built up over the habitat, at first only millimeters thick, and then centimeters, and then so thick that the habitat itself seemed to vanish inside a dirty snowball.

By the time the full cargo of water was exhausted, they had painstakingly built up a shell of ice several meters thick.

"You sure this will work?" May said.

"It's crude, but it will have to do," Domingo said.

The ship now had a long cometary tail, stretching out into space away from the sun, ionized to a faintly blue glow. Right now they must be the brightest thing in the sky of Earth, an unexpected comet.

The Earth was huge now, filling almost half the sky. It had narrowed to a crescent, and even as he watched, the crescent shrank as they slid across into the night. Below them, the darkness crackled with the flashes of equatorial lightning. Domingo almost imagined that he could feel the first brushes of atmosphere.

"Inside," he said. "We don't have much time."

Once they had gotten inside, May began to remove her suit. He stopped her.

"We'd better stay in our suits," he said. "Just in case."

"If the entry heat burns through the ice, suits won't do us much good," she said.

"Nevertheless," he said.

They could hear it now, a thin shriek, almost ultrasonic. Very slowly, things drifting in the cabin started to fall to one side. As they entered the thin outer wisps of atmosphere, they were beginning to decelerate.

Rapidly, it got worse. In a few minutes the deceleration reached a standard gee. They were spread-eagled against the bulkhead. May reached out one gloved hand to hold his. The acceleration kept on increasing. They were pinned to the wall, unable to move, as the ship was buffeted around. Domingo wished that spacesuits incorporated a bit more padding. He imagined pieces of ice breaking off. They must be leaving a trail a hundred miles long.

"Domingo," May said.

"Yeah?"

"I want to say, it was good to know you," she said. "I thought I'd say that."

"You're not angry that I hijacked your ship?"

"I am. But I've had other things on my mind lately. You've moved way down on the list."

"Thanks," he said, and then, "It was good to know you, too."

The acceleration kept building, and the world narrowed down to a tunnel, bordered in purple, as Domingo began to black out. Maybe he did. It was almost a surprise when the acceleration began to let up. "I think that the worst is over," he said, and just then, as if to spite him, a huge piece of ice broke away, and they jerked and tumbled. He could hear the aluminum of the walls groan as it twisted under unexpected strain. "Shit," he said. "Hold together, baby. Just for a minute. Just a minute more. Hold together, god damn it!"

It held together.

Now the worst definitely was over. There was a leak somewhere; even through his helmet, he could hear the sound of escaping atmosphere. But the ship had held up.

"God damn," he said. "I don't believe it. I don't believe it."

"We're alive," May said.

When they exited the atmosphere, and checked systems, they verified their orbit. Braking through the atmosphere had captured the ship into a long, highly elliptical orbit.

Most of the exterior cameras had failed, but from the few that were left, Domingo could see—somewhat to his surprise—that his little pod was still attached to the ship, still glued to its docking position next to the hatch. The hatch had been on the wake side, the side that had experienced the least heating in the turbulent entry, and as far as he could tell from a remote inspection, it seemed undamaged.

"I don't know what it felt like in there," traffic control told them, "but you sure put on an impressive show from here."

The leak in the cabin came from a longitudinal weld seam that had separated as aerodynamic stresses attempted to flatten the sphere. The icy coating had held up, though. It was impossible to repair the seam from inside, and they would have to stay in their suits until rescue came.

Fortunately, though, according to traffic control, rescue would be quick enough. Now that they were captured into Earth orbit, a ship could get to them well before their long trajectory hit atmosphere again. "The tug *Mississippi Constitution* is on its way," the guy at traffic control said. "You should see them in about an hour."

"We're glad to hear it," Domingo said. "Don't want to go through that again."

Rescue, though, posed a bit of a problem for him. Even in the dubious case that May

stayed silent about his hijacking the cargo, his face was too well known, and he was wanted for piracy in too many places. Near Earth orbit was a tangle of overlapping legal jurisdictions, and who he would be turned over to would depend on what flag *Mississippi Constitution* flew under, and what habitat they docked out of. It could be as severe as Libyan space code, which would mean the death penalty for hijacking, or as comparatively lenient as Ecuador, which would consider hijacking a civil offense, and would impose only civil penalties that would result in exile to Earth. But no matter who showed up to rescue them, for him, a rescue would mean the end of freedom.

The long elliptical orbit they were in would bring them back around to Earth. If he separated at apogee, the pod had enough delta-V for him to maneuver into the cloud of habitats and orbital factories. Somewhere in the cloud, he would be able to find friends, people who had friends or relatives among the pirate crews of Anteros, or were sympathetic to the Anteros cause. He had no reason to linger.

He waited until May was occupied, discussing their orbital parameters with traffic control to prepare for the rendezvous, and silently headed for the hatch. They were both already suited up, and there was no need to depressurize.

But by the time he had opened the hatch, May was there. She had both of his guns; the empty railgun attached to a clip at her belt, the glue harpoon in her right hand.

He turned to look at her, but didn't say anything.

After a moment, she said, "You're leaving without saying goodbye?"

"I'm not much of one for goodbyes," he said.

"Wait," she said. "There's something I want to show you." She reached around behind her, and retrieved a small railgun. It was identical to the one he'd just given her. She aimed it just over his left shoulder, but didn't pull the trigger. "This one is charged," she said.

"You had that all along?"

"Yes."

"I thought I searched."

"It was hidden in my hair."

"Oh."

"I just wanted you to know." She clipped her gun onto her belt. "I'm not helpless." She paused for a second, and then said, "You should be more careful." She handed him his two guns, first the railgun, and then the glue harpoon. "You left these."

"Thanks."

"You might need them sometime."

He nodded. "Maybe."

"I need to confess something. I lied to you, way back. I told you my name is May. My name is Marya. I'm Marya Hayes."

He thought for a moment. "I see," he said. "Hayes Mining. Your company?"

"Me."

"I see."

"Suppose—" she said, "Suppose maybe some day I might want to get in contact with a pirate. Could happen."

He nodded.

"How would I get in touch with you?"

He thought for a moment, then named a frequency. "Leave a message, voice only, no data. Use the word 'incandescent.' We have people, run data-mining. Somebody will get back to you."

"Okay," she said. She floated forward, and reached her arms around him. Inside the hardshell suit, the embrace felt like two steel cans clinking together.

"Goodbye," he said.

"See you later," she said. ○

Since her first published story appeared in *Asimov's* ("Burgerdroid," June 2008), Felicity Shoulders has finished graduate school with an MFA in Writing, moved back to her hometown of Portland, Oregon, started a novel, and baked more than twelve pies. Her second story for us reveals the harsh reality of . . .

# CONDITIONAL LOVE

Felicity Shoulders

The new patient was five or six years old, male, Caucasian, John Doe as usual. Grace checked the vitals his bed sensors were feeding her board and concluded he was asleep. She eased the door of 408 open and stepped in.

The boy's head was tilted on his pillow, brown curls cluttering his forehead. Sleep had flushed his cheeks so he looked younger than the estimate. He seemed healthy, with no visible deformities, and if he had been opted for looks, it had worked—Grace would have described him as "cherubic." He wouldn't have been dumped if nothing was wrong, so Grace found herself stepping softly, unwilling to disturb him and discover psychological conditions.

"Don't worry about waking him, he sleeps pretty deep."

Grace started and turned to the other bed. "Hi, Minnie."

The girl grimaced. "I go by my full name now, Dr. Steller." Grace brought up her board to refresh her memory, but the girl said, "Minerva. Had you forgotten they're doubling up rooms?"

"Yep, you caught me."

"Is the rise in numbers caused by a rise in opting? Or is it a rise in surrenders, or arrests of parents?"

"Lord, Minn—Minerva, I don't know. Planning to be a reporter when you grow up?"

"No, a scientist," Minerva said and smiled, pleased to be asked.

"Why the scalpel-edged questions then?"

"Just curious if my campaign had had any effect," Minerva said, nodding toward the window. The billboard across from the Gene-Engineered Pediatric In-patient Center flashed a smog warning, then a PSA about eye strain from computer visors, but Grace remembered when it had borne a static image: Minnie, one year old, a pink sundress exposing the stubs of her arms and legs. *Babies should be born, not made.* The ad had stayed up until Minnie was eight, three years after her parents turned her over to GEPIC, and apparently she had seen it. She was twelve now, with serious eyes and a loose ponytail, dark blonde.

"You're on incoming examinations now?" Minerva asked.

"Yes," Grace said, eyes on the John Doe's file.

"It's a step down, isn't it? Do you mind?"

"I'm fine," Grace said. "I see the grow-baths are working."

The girl allowed herself to be deflected. She held up her right arm, complete but ridged with scars. "One down, three to go."

"Better than we ever thought we could do back when I was on your treatment team."

Minerva shrugged. "They're pretty excited. They say I'm a regulatory gene enigma. How my arm starts growing, then stops. How sometimes things grow that shouldn't." She lifted the left sleeve of her T-shirt, a dinosaur one from the Natural History Museum, a few sizes too big. That arm was submerged in murky gel up to the wrist, and from the crook of the elbow a thumb extended.

"I'm sure it will be over soon," said Grace, and stroked the back of the girl's right hand, baby-smooth skin between bulges of scar tissue.

Minerva lifted her face with a smile, then looked across the room and pursed her lips. "New boy waking up. You'll love this."

Grace turned and saw that the boy was indeed stirring, half-blocking the window's light with a drowsy fist. His eyes flickered open, slashes of blue, then widened to cartoonish proportions. "Who are you?" he said, as if Grace was the Blue Fairy instead of a doctor who hadn't had her coffee yet.

Grace gave the boy a warm, flattered smile, aware of Minerva watching. "I'm Dr. Steller, but most of the kids call me Dr. Grace," she managed. "How are you feeling?"

"Good!"

"I'm here to check and make sure you stay that way, okay?"

He nodded and Grace went through the motions of taking his pulse, listening to his breath. Much of this ritual was obviated by the sensors in his hospital bed, yet it persisted. A way to comfort the patient, Grace thought, or the doctor. New admissions to GEPIC were often sullen, frightened, or locked into the neuroses created by their genes or families; many were sedated before she arrived to document their troubles. But this boy was something new. She couldn't remember any other patient giggling at the touch of the stethoscope.

Grace gave the boy the standard exam and found nothing standard: none of the deformities, bruises, and cuts she was used to finding on Does brought in from the streets. He had been admitted low on nutrients and fluids, but the IV had taken care of that. Nothing to photograph for a police file, nothing unusual even, except being friendly and above the mean for cuteness.

"You don't know your name, huh?" Grace asked, ruffling his dark hair.

He shrugged, shoulders contracting inside the oversized pajama-top. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay, honey." This wasn't her department, but she went on. "What do you remember?"

"I remember waking up. You were here."

Grace shook her head and took out a blood vial for the gene lab. "This will hurt a little," she warned.

"Okay," he said, and his smile ebbed as the needle went in.

"There you go, all done." She wrapped a purple bandage around his finger, at which he stared, enchanted.

"Dr. Steller?" the nurses' station called through the intercom. "If you're done with the 2147 exam, there's a visitor for you."

Grace checked her board to make sure this Doe was number 2147, and noticed there was a rush on the file. "Send 'em up." She turned to go, but her patient had her by the coat.

"Can I come?"

Grace unballled the soft hand and knelt, smiling. "Not right now, but I'll be back soon."

He nodded.

"Goodbye," the boy said as she opened the door.

"I'll come back."

"Goodbye, Dr. Grace," Minerva echoed.

Grace made her way down to the bank of elevators and started writing her John Doe 2147 report on her board, towing photos and stat-blocks into the text with her fingertip. The elevator pinged. She looked up to see a tall man with a familiar slump, dressed like an elongated GQ model. "Kafouri."

"Hi, Grace. Where the hell am I? Never been up beyond the second floor."

"We're over capacity—squeezing new admits in up here with the chronics and long-term treatments."

"Shit! Nothing like a roomie with his skin falling off to put a fresh guppy at his ease."

"Bob, please don't."

"Right, no 'guppies.' Swearing's fine, though, right?" He chuckled her between the shoulder blades. "Anyway, it's good to see you. Been a year or two, hasn't it?"

Grace glanced at him. He must remember their last encounter, over the Macauley case, but he seemed determined to be jovial. Silver hairs stood out among the black now, matching the smile- or squint-lines she'd always noticed by his eyes. She had a few grays herself. "Something like that. I thought you finally got depressed and transferred to homicide for your morale."

"No way, doc. One of these days I'm going to try for a lieutenant's pension, but not 'til I can have 'hero cop' on my retirement headline."

"Isn't that usually on obits?"

"Ha ha. I know what I'm doing. Let me see my boy."

"I take it the rush order is yours," she said, starting back down the hallway.

Kafouri fell in step next to her. "Has psych been yet? What do they make of him?"

"No. Why? What do you expect from them?"

Kafouri stared. "You haven't noticed?"

"Don't be cryptic, Bob."

"Which room is it?"

"408. What's wrong with him?"

"I'll show you. Go ahead."

Grace scowled and pushed open the door.

The boy's chin dropped, displaying a mangled slice of peach. "Who are *you*?"

He was charmed, awed, and beaming just as before, but Grace couldn't help feeling a stab at being forgotten. She turned away quickly as Kafouri entered, and Minerva met her eyes over a heavy tray of food.

The patient gaped at the detective. "What's *your* name?"

"You don't remember your friend Bob, Danny boy? Why am I not surprised?" He looked at the other bed long enough to raise an eyebrow at the mound of bacon and eggs on Minerva's tray, ringed with bowls of fruit salad.

"I think I'd remember meeting you," said the boy.

"Sure you would, Tiger. Hey, you know Dr. Steller?"

Grace brought a composed smile around to face them, and the blue eyes gazed at her. "No. Hello," he said with polite disinterest.

"Here, kiddo, got you something." Kafouri brought a small teddy bear out of his coat and snapped the price tag off its ear.

The boy grabbed the toy and crushed it close. "Thank you!"

"See you later, Danny." Kafouri held the door for Grace, who walked through without saying goodbye to the children. "Coffee?" he asked after the door clicked shut, and Grace nodded.



The boy's ready defection stung unexpectedly, but Grace smiled and lifted an eyebrow as they headed down the hall. "Teddy bears, Bob?"

"You saw the little guy. You wish you'd thought of it first."

"Why'd you call him Danny?"

"We tagged him Daniel back at the precinct. Seemed to suit him, but the hag in Admitting said a J.D. was a J.D. and we couldn't choose a name for him like he was a puppy."

"Instead we have a hospital full of Janes and Johns, like a doll factory with two models," Grace said as she opened the door to the fourth floor staff lounge with its fragrant atmosphere of coffee. Kafouri threw his coat onto a ratty armchair and flopped down.

Grace eyed the detective as she poured two mugs. "I sincerely hope that you didn't put a rush on Daniel's exam because you think he's cute."

"What do you mean *I* think he's cute? I could hear your clock ticking from down the hall."

Grace rolled her eyes and settled into the couch. "What's up, and how does it advance your 'hero cop' daydreams?"

"All roads lead to Bob Kafouri, Hero Cop. You know I've been working the guppy-dump forever. Interviewing crazy or contorted toddlers, filing photos of cigarette burns, hoping somebody's daddy does his first misdemeanor and gets his DNA in the computers . . . sometimes you catch some miserable parents. It's a grind."

"And it doesn't get your name in the papers."

"Right. Busting the labs will."

"You've busted opt-docs before."

"Sure, crappy opt-docs. The smart ones don't give parents enough rope to tie the noose. And I want the smart ones, the guys designing the opts. I want Betty Crocker, not the guy baking the cake. I'm going for the industry."

"You think it's that organized, Bob? I thought it was every opt-doc for himself."

"I'm pretty sure. Too much money for it to stay a cottage industry forever. Anyway, I'm afraid they might be branching into new markets."

"You mean . . . what *do* you mean? New kinds of opts?"

"I mean not just selling to parents. That's why I wanted you to examine Daniel right away. Did you find any signs of abuse?"

Grace blanched. "God—no, he's fine as far as I can tell. Do you really think he was engineered for . . ."

"It's just my guess, but if that weird memory thing of his was built in on purpose? It resets every time he sees somebody new. He can't live a normal life like that, not even close."

"But he wouldn't remember enough to be frightened of the abuser. Christ." Grace leaned forward, cupping her mug. "Bob, there's no way to know. It could be a mistake—there are five floors of patients here to testify that genetic optimization is a gamble. He could be a pretty-opt with an unfortunate side effect, or a botched mental-opt of some sort."

"Could be. But it'll happen sooner or later. It's an ugly world."

Grace put down her coffee. She was still trying to think of something to say when Dr. Langford put her head in at the door. She had only been at GEPIC for two years, a small woman with golden-brown skin and a stubborn set to her mouth.

"There you are, Steller—I just saw one of your admits, John Doe number . . ." the neuropsychiatrist started to unlock her board, but Grace interrupted.

"Call him Daniel, it's easier. You're done with your evaluation already?"

Langford raised her elegant eyebrows. "Preliminary. There was a rush on the case."

Kafouri gave her a charming smile. "That was me. We cops are an impatient bunch. Bob Kafouri."

"Thea Langford." She leaned against the counter next to the coffeemaker. "So, as far as I can tell, he's imprinting."

"Imprinting," repeated Kafouri.

"The primal connection an animal makes when it first sees its mother."

"Sure, ducklings. But this kid isn't a duckling. Or a puppy, so I've been told."

"It happens in other species. Monkeys, for one. But the point is it shouldn't be happening. He's not a duckling or an infant, but he seems to imprint every time he sees an adult, and each time it happens he loses his memory."

"He remembers something," Kafouri said. "Doesn't seem blank."

"He loses what we call 'episodic memory.' Semantic knowledge he retains: he knows what a window is, can be taught vocabulary. I can't say much about procedural skills until I come back with props, but that's another part of the brain so I'm guessing he'll test out fine."

"Could the memory problem be a misopt?" Grace asked.

"I don't know development or gene-build, so I couldn't say. Other than the fugue state, he seems normal, even above average in intelligence until he reimprints."

"Completely normal?" asked Kafouri.

"Well, no. It's not normal for a five-year-old, a more or less rational being, to imprint. You can take away his toys or his half-eaten food, and he doesn't get mad. I would guess he'd even stay affectionate if you hit him."

Kafouri gave Steller a look, and she replied, "It doesn't prove anything. Maybe the imprinting was the ment-opt, but the memory problems were unintentional. You can't tell me some of these lousy opting parents wouldn't order up a kid who loves them unconditionally. Besides, if you're right, why the hell would your slave traders dump him? The fugue and reimprinting would be too much for parents, but perfect for them."

Kafouri shrugged, and turned back to the waiting neuropsych. "Kid was a mess when we brought him in—found him crying his eyes out downtown. So you're saying he was doing the duckling thing on every man and woman that walked by?"

"It seems likely. The crowds would be confusing for him."

Grace cleared her throat. "What's going to happen to him? You said yourself, he's gifted."

"Part of the time."

"Still, are we just going to document and process, let the forensic genetics lab have a look for the case file, and then throw him into long-term care?"

"I can't recommend him for foster, Dr. Steller. There's too much risk of exploitation or abduction for a child with his memory difficulties."

"How is he with other children?"

"Judging from his roommate, normal enough. Minnie says he doesn't forget anything until the next adult comes in."

"Minerva," Grace corrected, and the other woman stared at her. "She goes by Minerva now. Look, Langford, Daniel would be miserable in a perm-ward. You'd essentially be throwing a naïve boy into a group of disturbed, unpredictable kids for the first time every day. If not every hour . . ." Grace tapered off, and Langford didn't reply. The two women regarded each other.

"C'mon, Grace, I like the little guy too, but there's no lasting harm," said Kafouri.

"Yeah, he's self-cleaning," Grace muttered, and stalked past Langford to empty her coffee into the sink with a splat. "Thanks for your time, Dr. Langford. Bob, I'll go double-check the patient now that I know what you're looking for."

"You'd have seen the evidence if there was any," he said, shrugging his coat on and adjusting his tie. "It's up to the gene guys now."

\* \* \*

Grace stood at the door to 408, peering through the glass. She thumbed the monitor button and listened to the occasional clink of Minerva's fork against her plate. Daniel wasn't in view, but she thought she heard his feet slapping against the vinyl tile near the door.

"I wouldn't," Minerva said.

"I want to find Jimmy," Daniel's voice replied.

The girl pushed the visor back on her head. "You won't. It's a big hospital and they don't like us guppies wandering around it."

"What's a guppy?"

"I am. You are. Toys someone made wrong."

Daniel walked into Grace's view and stood at the foot of Minerva's bed. "What do you mean, toys?"

She picked at the edges of her mountain of beef stroganoff with her fork. "I've explained it to you before, but it took a long time and you forgot it anyway. Just learn the word 'guppy.' It's not nice, but it means us."

The boy stood on tiptoe at the window, pink heels disappearing into the baggy pants.

"You can sit on my bed if you want. You'll see better."

Daniel glanced at the door, then climbed up and kneeled, looking out. "Will Jimmy come back?"

"Probably. He brings lunch and dinner, most days."

"What will I do if he doesn't come back?"

"I think you'll recover."

Grace opened the door and the monitor clicked off behind her. Daniel twisted around to see who'd come in, and his eager face turned blissful. "Hello! What's your name?"

"Dr. Grace," Grace said again, with a rueful smile.

"Back again?" said Minerva. "I thought his initial exam was filed."

"My shift is over, but you're very well-informed."

The girl tapped her computer headset. "What else am I going to be?"

Grace looked at the walls around Minerva's bed, covered with pictures cut out of hand-me-down magazines. A long poster of the stages of a cheetah's lope was taped along the vent under the window and fluttered occasionally. *National Geographic* maps were stuck to the wall below her TV. Daniel's side of the room, by contrast, was blank. He looked so new in his hospital-issue clothes under his hospital-issue blanket. He hadn't touched his dinner. She tried to remember Brandon Macauley's room, recalled a line of art postcards—Sargent, maybe—and photos of courtyards at the Alhambra, cathedral naves.

Minerva interrupted Grace's thoughts. "Ever since you ordered Daniel's IV out, he's been trying to follow people out of the room."

"I'll set the door to auto-lock then, okay?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Would you mind if I read to him?"

"Go ahead. I'll warn you, though, it loses its novelty appeal soon enough."

"What's 'novelty'?" asked Daniel.

"Something new, unexpected. Everything, for you."

Grace sat down, pulled out her board and cleared her throat. The boy flopped across his bed onto his elbows, the picture of attention. Minerva bent each earbud down and flipped her visor over her eyes. "This story is called *Charlotte's Web*," Grace began. Daniel kicked his bare feet together in the air as she read, forgot to close his mouth, looked like any kid absorbed in a story.

"Fern couldn't take her eyes off the tiny pig," Grace was reading when the door

clicked and swept inward. She and the boy both glanced up, but all they could see was the airplane-patterned sleeve of Nurse Biggs's scrubs as he stood behind the door. "Oh, *look* at him! He's absolutely perfect," Grace continued over the murmur of voices in the hall.

"No, Dr. Das said two more days," the nurse said loudly.

Daniel didn't look away from Grace's face, and she smiled as she read, "She closed the carton carefully. First she kissed her father, then she kissed her mother. Then she opened the lid again—"

"So get her some ointment!" Nurse Biggs said and bustled into the room, letting the door swing shut behind him and tearing the backing off a drug patch. The boy looked up and beamed into Biggs's face. Grace paused with her finger at her place in the text, watching Daniel gaze across the room at the man.

"You'll have to start over, of course," said Minerva as Biggs lifted her sleeve and applied the patch, moving carefully so he wouldn't jostle her arm out of the grow solution. "I read him a whole chapter of that book after lunch."

Grace locked the board and stood. "I have to get going. Have a good afternoon, both of you." She paused in the doorway.

Daniel clambered off his bed and padded over to Biggs. He tugged on the man's scrubs and Minerva sighed at the inevitable. "Who are you?"

A few days later, Grace was alone in the women's dressing room. She leaned her forehead against the cool metal of her locker and hauled on the ends of her ceremonial stethoscope, feeling it taut against the knots in her neck.

The door squeaked, and she raised her head to see Langford, early for a night shift. "Tough day?" she asked, and Grace nodded. "Too bad, it was beautiful. Summer-bright but not summer-hot."

"Saw it out the window a few times."

"Sorry for bringing it up."

"Have you ever noticed we get more voluntary surrenders when it's nice out? I figure the opters look outside and think of all the fun they'd be having if they didn't have to take care of this kid."

"That's pretty harsh," said Langford, stowing her bag in her locker.

"Opters are usually the worst kind of people to parent a kid who needs special care. They wouldn't have sprung for illegal opts if they didn't cut corners, if they could accept what life gave them."

"There are other reasons why people have a made baby."

Grace suppressed a grimace over the phrase. "Sure. Besides the perfectionists, there are stage parents trying to live out their thwarted dreams."

Langford watched Grace. "You sound so bitter."

"I've been here eleven years, Langford. That's enough to make anyone bitter." She stood up, opened her locker and started pulling off her scrubs. "Or maybe it only takes one day like today, when a couple brings in their optimized baby for voluntary surrender because she's 'not right' and it turns out the opt was perfect, they just gave her brain damage shaking her when she cried." Grace yanked her shoelaces loose, avoiding Langford's eyes. She sighed. "Can we talk about the other day, Thea? I feel like I came on too strong about Daniel."

"You noticed that too?"

"Yeah. Maybe I owe you a mocha to apologize. I just want to make sure somebody takes care of him."

"He'll get taken care of wherever he ends up."

"A kiddy ward may keep him healthy, but they won't try to accommodate him, give him a life."

Langford gathered her braids back and looped them into a bun. "He'd be a good subject for a grant, and it might get him his own environment, special care."

Grace looked up, dangling one sneaker.

"I can ask around my department, try to get someone interested. Research is the best way to leverage your way out of here, after all." Langford closed her locker and stood with her hand on the latch. "You know, in this place, you have to know when to care, Grace. And how much." She pushed open the door and disappeared into the hallway. "Be well," Grace thought she heard her call. She wondered if Langford would report her, if she already had. They'd listen to a psych specialist, and there was no room in her file for another administrative intervention.

She finished changing and looked down at her clothes—tailored trousers with well-placed cargo pockets, button-up shirt—and wondered who she was pretending to be, every night and day on the train, what this Grace did on days off. She headed for the exit, but on impulse opened the stairwell door and headed up to Floor 4, alone with her labored breath. Room 408 was quiet and there was only one bed.

"The perm-ward bus came today," said Minerva. "Don't worry, I don't mean they took him. Some spots opened up on 2, that's all."

"I came to see you, anyway," Grace lied.

Minerva shoved her headset mike and visor up over her head. "You can sit down."

Grace did, easing herself onto the long empty foot of the bed, spread with a charity quilt. "I remember when your headset was held on with bobby pins."

"Yes, I much prefer having hands."

"How's number two doing?"

Minerva jerked a velcro strap open to free her left arm. She shook it off to display a glistening, fully formed palm with five budding digits as well as the existing thumb in the crotch of her elbow.

"Congratulations!"

"Almost done." Minerva's smile was brief and tight as she sank her hand back into the viscous liquid.

"Aren't you pleased?"

"Yes, mostly. I've always dreamed of having hands, but they want me to have legs, too."

"That surprises you?"

"I don't want to do it. It took me two years to grow these. Eating huge meals and running an IV, lying with my stumps in goo and having minor operations every week." She lifted her right hand. "As far as I'm concerned, this is it. Two of these is all I need to pick things up, press buttons, lever myself out of a chair."

"But think of everything you'll be able to do. Walk, run, play games . . ."

"It's not worth it." Minerva snaked her hand into Grace's. "It hurts, growing limbs. Growing bone is the worst. I can barely sleep. Sometimes I get phantom limb pain, which I never have without the grow bath. And then there are the missteps, the amputations, the feedings—I had to gain over fifteen pounds for this arm, you know. I can't spend more years this way. I have to get out of this room." She squeezed the woman's fingers, and there was appeal in her eyes.

Grace wondered who Minerva's new wellness lead was, if any of her current team

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had asked her what she wanted. She looked at the child's hand, the skin lined with scars from stops and starts, the fingers already callused from computer controls.

"You used to read me that story, *Charlotte's Web*. Do you remember?"

"After you were surrendered, sure."

"A funny story to read to a guppy. Do you know why I cried, back then?"

"I thought you missed your parents."

"A little. But mostly it was because I understood. I was five, but I understood—my parents took the guilty plea and the fine when I was two so they could get government assistance. They did the PSAs to get most of the fine waived. Then they waited. If you take the home care deal and give it a 'good faith effort,' you can surrender the kid to the government without the larger fine. A 'good faith effort' is three years. They turned me over at three years and one day."

"You were already smart at five."

"The ment-opt was the part that worked."

The two stared out the window at the train, lights bright against the dusk, pulling out of the Rapid station.

"I've missed you," the girl said.

Grace slipped her ID lanyard over her head as she walked by the "Cleveland Regional Gene-Engineered Pediatric Inpatient Center" sign. She shoved the thick plastic card into a jacket pocket and zipped it closed, then hurried across the square to the Rapid stop to take a seat.

Most of her colleagues didn't mind being asked about their work. Some seemed to relish the opportunity for dramatic anecdotes. But Grace changed out of scrubs and avoided walking out of the Center within sight of her train, so that no commuters would ask. In theory, GEPIC employees were supposed to welcome the chance to educate the public about the dangers of illegal gene-engineering. But knowing they were supposed to cheerfully embrace outreach didn't make the ghoulish questions—"What was your worst case?" "Do many of them die?" "Do you have the boy with two mouths there? The one from the ads?"—any easier to endure. She had applied for the job the same way she had volunteered to work at a free clinic in Mexico after medical school: full of shining hope. Even after eleven years, it was hard to listen to people's tabloid fantasies about it with equanimity.

Grace read the *Plain Dealer* on her board. She found herself searching the local crime section for signs of a ring of kid-traffickers, amateur-detective style. She blanked the board and stared out the scratched window for the three remaining stops between GEPIC and her building.

Her apartment was on the sixth floor, with an unappreciated sliver of lake view. She slumped her bag by the door, levered off her shoes. The dent in her couch accepted her again as she hugged her legs, stared around for something to occupy her. There was dust on the books she'd already read, travel books and memoirs of teachers, humanitarians, biologists. There was a pile of dirty dishes blocking the screen of the entertainment set, and more attracting fruit flies in the kitchen.

Her eye settled on an end table cluttered with gifts from her patients. She picked up a clumsy origami crane and an intriguing little abstract in clay, fingered a few loops of wooden beads that slumped against the bulletin board behind, the layered photos and crayon drawings. What good had she done them? She wondered if Daniel would draw her something, if he stayed with her for long enough. The Steller family mantel clock began to chime, and her stomach stirred in response. She unfolded herself and made for the kitchen without looking at the framed photo, at Brandon Macauley's uneven smile, or behind it at his sketch of her, done in short, sure lines between waves of pain.

The phone rang shrill, the ID flashing *Kafouri, R.*

"Good news in our little cherub's case."

"Daniel? What is it? Did you find the parents?"

"No parents, but there's a distinctive pattern in the junk pairs—not seen in nature, as they say. Might be a byproduct of this lab's technique, and the boys think it might match up with some other high-end stuff."

"What does that mean for Daniel?"

"He might be part of the nation's first high-end lab bust! Listen, I'll give you a call if we get any closer—so you can be sure and read that headline."

He didn't wait to see what she would say before hanging up. The phone went dark and Grace replaced it slowly, fighting the urge to throw it. She picked up the book next to it, a turgid historical novel that had seemed more promising in the shop, and sat down, trying to slow her breathing, focus on the page. She stared through the words for a minute or ten. With a jerk she pitched the book, which skidded to a halt on the kitchen threshold. It lay splayed and rumpled, and Grace watched without satisfaction as it settled its pages into creases, subsiding under its own weight as if with a sigh.

The next week, Minerva was wheeling around a light wheelchair in iridescent gold, tracing the long scuffmarks on the vinyl where Daniel's bed had been. "Did you pick the color?" Grace asked.

"What?"

"The chair."

Minerva shook her head. "Got ten digits though, and no extras." She raised her left hand high so it caught the light off the building opposite and held the five new fingers wide. Their skin was red from rubbing the chair's hand rim, and her elbow sported a dressing. "I heard you came to see me yesterday. Walked in on my laser ablation?"

"Didn't see the warning light."

"Did they make you go to the ophthalmoscope?"

"I checked out."

"I had to go under the 'scope myself once, years ago. They gave me too little anesthesia, and I woke up in the middle of one of the ablations. I went from a queasy dream to a bed ringed by adults in scarlet plastic hoods. I guess I was so terrified I failed to look down at the laser cauterizer working on my stub."

"So your eyes were okay then?"

"Yeah. I kept telling them at the time that I felt fine, my eyes didn't hurt. I didn't believe them when they told me I could have a retinal burn without knowing, that there are no nerves on the back of your eye. I still thought my nerves were on my side."

"So this is it," Grace said. "This is all you wanted?"

"Ten fingers and a chair, yup."

"And they're not going to stop?"

Minerva scooted into place next to her, facing the window. Pink-white fluff rolled up against the benches and shelter posts—there must be cherry trees nearby losing their blooms. "Some days I think they want the update piece in the news: 'Whatever happened to the limbless baby?' When I'm not being unkind, I think they want to feel they've done all they can."

Grace let down her ponytail and shook her hair out. "What do you want to do when you grow up? You said a scientist, but what kind? Don't you think you'll want, or even need, to walk?"

"I want to clean and study dinosaur bones. In a lab. I've seen them do it, they sit the whole time." She laughed.



"How can you be sure? You seem so certain that this will mean a better life for you, but what if you're wrong?"

Minerva's face set. "You believed Brandon Macauley." Grace's hands froze halfway to her hair. "How could you be sure his life wouldn't have gotten better? That they wouldn't have developed a miracle cure? But you let him make his own decision. You trusted him."

The doctor stared, and her voice came out too high. "I—I didn't do that. I was cleared."

"Sure. You 'made a mistake' about his dosage on a new drug. But you did believe him that he wanted to die. When he said that, you believed him."

Grace glanced over her shoulder. "Yes. I did."

"All I'm saying is I don't want legs." Minerva's smile was wan and almost lopsided.

"He was older than you."

"I read at a college-senior level."

"That's—I don't know, Minerva."

"I want a life, not a patienthood."

Grace looked out the window for a time, jaw tight, and finally kneeled beside Minerva's chair and embraced her. Minerva wrapped her arms around the doctor's back and squeezed, closing her eyes.

"Is that what you came to talk to me about?" she whispered.

"Yes and no. I wanted to talk about Daniel. I've just been visiting him."

Minerva nodded slowly. "He's a nice kid. I like him, when he's himself for a while."

"You've never been to the perm-wards, have you?"

"Psych? No. But from what I hear, I wouldn't want to."

"It's a warehouse. That's all it is. A—" She paused, sighed. "I bought a car." She saw Minerva's eyebrows jump. "Haven't had one for years."

"I'm glad." The girl smiled at her with a sort of reckless joy, and the new hand grasped hers, surprisingly strong under its smooth skin. "I can help."

Grace inhaled sharply. "What do you—" She looked again toward the door, at the microphone and camera she knew were there.

Minerva drew her into another hug and whispered, "I can read maps. I could keep an eye on the news. I'm great with computers, I can find things out . . ."

"I'll be fine," Grace replied. "Don't worry about me." She pulled back and stood up. "My shift's about to start."

"I know it is. 3:15."

"How do you know that?"

"The crypto on staff schedules is perfunctory. Like I said, I'm great with computers." She half-smiled.

Grace turned, but Minerva wheeled after her and caught her lab coat with one hand.

"Minerva—"

"Come to see me tomorrow. The nurses don't like me getting down into the chair by myself because it gives my spine a jolt, but I can do it already. Anyway, you get off work at three, when they're changing shifts, giving each other reports. I can meet you at the elevators." She grinned. "I can get out of this room."

Minerva's gaze held Grace's, hazel eyes to tired gray, and the fingers slackened, dropped from the coat. The woman leaned over and kissed the child's pale forehead. "Goodbye, Minerva."

Minerva turned away. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dr. Grace."

Grace pulled over as the sky deepened toward indigo over the treetops. She had turned down an open service road in the Kentucky forest, and now when she rolled

down the window and stopped the car, she could hear nothing but the woods and the pops and sighs of the engine.

She got out, listened again, felt the chill of oncoming night raise the hairs on the back of her hands. Trees stooped, graceful and so green in the dusky light that they strained the eye. The occasional pink of a blossoming redbud glowed out of the shadows. She could smell leaves, earth, other aromas once familiar. She wondered if Minerva had ever been to a forest, smelled this kind of air.

As she had since she drove away from GEPIC, she tried to smooth away the thought of Minerva that caught again and again at her growing sense of peace. Now she failed, and as she leaned against the dusty car she could see the girl alone in her room, circling in her chair. Or perhaps she wasn't by herself—perhaps security had heard her strange offer, perhaps she was answering questions.

Grace felt a sick downward pressure in her chest, as if her lungs were empty. Had Minerva waited for Grace? Had she truly wanted to run away? She must know she stood out, that she'd been a poster child and wouldn't be forgotten, that it was a horrible risk. GEPIC offered her a future—had she thought Grace would take her away from that? She was far too smart to expect it. But would all her intelligence keep her from wanting it?

Grace let out a long breath. She was squandering light.

The trunk opened quietly when she pressed the button, and Daniel didn't even stir. The sedative should be wearing off, but Minerva had been right—he was a deep sleeper. He was nestled into a fort of cushions, with bungees protecting him from boxes of cash and clothing, everything they would need to start a life somewhere.

She bent to listen to his breathing, the remnants of her guilt and confusion melting away. "David," she whispered, "wake up." She smoothed the hair back from his forehead and jiggled his hand. "David."

The child turned in his sleep, then opened his eyes and smiled. "I feel sleepy."

"I know, and you can sleep again soon, but I need you awake right now."

Daniel, now David, sat up and yawned. She cupped his chin and dribbled dilating drops into his eyes. He giggled as she put on a red plastic hood.

"There's going to be a bright light. I need you to look right at it for me, okay?"

"Okay." His bright blue irises were crowded aside by black. He reached out and felt around for her hand, which now, unshaking, gripped GEPIC's portable laser cauterizer. "Who are you?"

Grace caught sight of her reflection in the rear window and started. Who was she, faceless and impartial like the figures in Minerva's waking nightmare? She blinked to clear her scarlet-tinted vision. "I'm your mother." She thumbed the laser on and thought, *I'm the last person you're ever going to see, honey.* ○

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Steve Rasnic Tem has recent and forthcoming stories in *Interzone*, *Crimewave*, *Paradox*, *Cemetery Dance*, *Clockwork Phoenix 2*, *Exotic Gothic 3*, and *Phantoms*. His collected collaborations with wife Melanie Tem, *In Concert*, is now scheduled for a March publication by Centipede Press. While Steve's most recent *Asimov's* collaborative and solo stories, "In Concert" (December 2008) and "The Day Before the Day Before" (September 2009), have mostly stayed close to home, his latest tale roams an interstellar empire looking for . . .

# A LETTER FROM THE EMPEROR

Steve Rasnic Tem

A mishap occurred four sleeps from landfall. Jacob had been logging observations when he heard the alarm, so by the time he got down to the cargo bay it was all over. The bay door was breached. He stared at the switch through the window—it had been opened from inside the bay. Whatever had been inside the bay had been swept out into space.

"Anders?" he called through com. He waited. There was no answer. Ship command buzzed in his ear. *There are indications that Anders Nils . . .* Jacob shut the communication off. He didn't want to hear what command had to say. He went looking for Anders.

The forward crew cabin was empty. As were the toilets, the shower, records, navigation, engineering, recreation, general stores. Jacob had been in the recording room when the alarm went off. He systematically tried every compartment, passage, pipe, even the output trays of the garbage grinders. There was no place left to look. "Anders, please report your whereabouts," he called through com. Again no answer.

He waited. He turned the link to ship command back on. "Please report the whereabouts of Anders Nils," he said aloud.

*Anders Nils is not on board*, a woman's voice spoke softly into his ear. *Procedure is to query ship command first when there is an unscheduled breach of the cargo bay. Why did you fail to query ship command? Why did you shut off initial communications from ship command?*

Jacob didn't answer. He didn't know why he hadn't followed procedure. Maybe he already knew Anders was gone, but didn't want to hear command's confirmation. Was that it? It made very little sense—despite their long service together on messaging and data collection ships he and Anders weren't even friends, as far as he understood. Suddenly he wasn't sure. Was that possible?

How had they not become friends, enemies, something? Somehow he had avoided entanglement. He'd spent his long hours listening, the job they'd been trained to do, snatching the words out of space and trying to understand, and whenever possible delivering these stray messages to their intended destinations.

*Please respond to official queries.* Command's voice had lost some of its warmth, its naturalness. *You have a duty to respond to these questions.* Command was beginning to show its mechanical roots.

He was a professional, a sensor for the emperor, or for who- or whatever passed for the emperor these days, capturing the nuances machinery was still incapable of. "You record every stray fart," was the usual, vulgar summation of their duties. Such attention to detail discouraged both amity and enmity, as far as he was concerned.

He would be finishing the assignment alone. Perhaps even the entire tour of duty. The realization left him cold, furious. How was he supposed to manage it? Besides recording local observations and handling messaging, the ship delivered statements of regulation, and proclamations to the outlying settlements. But a quick replacement was impossible, out here on the farthest reaches of the empire, where the dividing line between empire and not-empire wasn't all that clear.

*Did Anders Nils speak to you before going to the cargo bay?*

Jacob gathered Anders's spare clothing into a bag. He catalogued his former crewmate's personal effects, his toiletries, his player, various small art objects.

*Please respond. Did Anders Nils speak to you of his intentions?*

Jacob ignored command's transmissions. He separated out all written notes and recordings, checking the storage on Anders's personal devices for data files and images. Anders's diary files were extensive and detailed, and he only had time to go through a sampling. The entries surprised him, but he had no time or inclination to be surprised.

*Did Anders Nils show observable signs of depression?*

He'd never liked talking to ship command. The fact that it appeared to possess more charisma and compassion than he did . . . grated.

He caught his first yawn while carefully placing Anders's personal documents into a sealed container. Over the next brief interval the yawns multiplied rapidly. There was no way to fight ship command's enforced sleep—he barely made it back to his bunk before oblivion wiped him away.

After sleep, command brought him up to dialogue regarding the incident. The temperature in the recording room had dropped noticeably into the discomfort zone.

"Please change your uniform to the appropriate formality." The voice out of the speaker was soft again, lush. He considered how brittle his own voice was in comparison. He brushed two fingers over his cuff until the correct dark blue color swam beneath them. "Correct." Pause. "The Emperor expresses his condolences for the loss of crewman reporter Anders Nils." The voice sounded achingly sincere. It made Jacob ashamed of his own underdeveloped powers of empathy. Another, awkwardly long pause. "How long did you serve with Anders Nils?"

"It would have been four years in a few sleeps."

"More precise, please."

"You have this information." He didn't bother to mask his annoyance,

"Answer please. We understand this may be a difficult time." Command rarely said "we." Suddenly Jacob felt quite unsure whom he was talking to.

Jacob ran his fingers over the table, accessing his personal diary. "Three years. Eleven months. Three weeks. Seventy-three hours. And four minutes, at least until the time of the hatch alarm."

Another long pause. Jacob knew this wasn't processing inefficiency. Com could formulate appropriate questions instantly. It was giving him time to think and remember, and it was measuring and analyzing that process. But as far as he knew, he had nothing to remember. So he waited.

"Did you know Anders had been depressed?"

"Was he?"

"Do you know why Anders would commit suicide?"

"Is that what he did? What is your percentage of certitude on that?"

"Forty-three percent."

"Then you don't know to a certainty."

Quite a long pause, then, "We do not know to a certainty."

"Then you don't know what you're talking about."

A red light glowed unsteadily on the panel. Jacob thought about Anders, concluded they'd never really been friends.

"You have heard the personal diaries of Anders Nils."

It wasn't a question. Wasn't command supposed to be asking questions? He answered anyway, thinking that at least he was doing *his* part. "I listened to some of it. There wasn't time for a full examination."

"What was your impression of the personal diaries of Anders Nils?"

"I . . . well, that's hard to say. He recorded a great deal. I suppose that surprised me. And they were well-composed, I think. Somewhat poetic, I suppose."

"Did any of the events described in the diaries of Anders Nils actually occur?"

"No, none that I heard. They were pretty outlandish."

"Please define 'outlandish,' as you understand it."

"Oh, unusual. Crazy. Impossible. We never went to the locations he describes. You know that very well. We did not visit those places, or have those adventures."

"You did not have the kind of relationship with Anders Nils he describes?"

"Well, no. No, I did not. I didn't know him all that well, actually."

"You were not friends?"

"Well, not close, not like that. We were acquaintances. We worked together. We had a working relationship."

"Why were you not friends?"

Jacob never would have expected command to ask such a thing. "I really don't know how to answer that," he finally replied.

"Why did you not know Anders was thinking of committing suicide?"

Jacob would not answer. He sat there silently, staring into the red eye lens mounted in the panel, until the countdown for landing preparations began.

The planet's surface was that light-trapping coating they'd used for official installations and supporting structures back before his grandfather was born. The fact that here and there it glistened and flowed with bits of color only emphasized how basically drab it all was. But it was durable and resistant to the attempts of most planetary ecologies to reclaim it.

"Welcome to Joy," the officer said, with what appeared to be a genuinely warm smile.

Jacob blinked. This wasn't the official designation. "From the looks of things, someone had a sense of humor."

"It would appear so," she said, still smiling. "Nine six oh gee four dash thirty-two."

"Then I'm in the correct place."

The com link in his ear murmured, *You may inform her that her uniform color has*

*shifted out of sequence*, but he ignored that. True, her outfit appeared slightly on the purplish side, but it was probably the best she could do. It was no doubt decades old and difficult to calibrate.

"I'm pleased. We don't get many visitors."

Protocols were loose here, he observed. Not that he really cared. "I'm only scheduled for two sleeps," he said, not really wanting to discourage her friendly manner, although he was sure it came across that way.

"Well, we'll see what we can show you during that time. I know that the reporter ships like to record as much as possible during their limited visits."

Com buzzed his ear. *There are currently 432 undelivered regulatory messages due for 960G4-32. Too many for practical application. Please select at your discretion.* He had no intention of passing along any of these messages. In any case, how could they be enforced?

He nodded, thinking she probably hadn't even been born yet when the last such ship arrived. She'd probably briefed herself from some aging manual. The truth was the system didn't care that much about the outlying bases—just some basic facts on population and armaments for the statistical grids. He'd heard that the assumption had always been that such far-flung installations would fade in and out of participation in the empire over time. Otherwise their construction would have been made more pleasing.

"Anya, you should have called me." The man's voice was somewhat frail, but commanding as he trotted into the room. He raised a palm. Jacob returned the gesture tentatively, no longer accustomed to the act.

"I believe I did, Colonel," she said softly, stepping back from her post as the man stepped onto the platform.

"Terrible bother, this scan business," he said, face slightly red. "But required. Looking for tentacles, I suppose."

It was an old joke. Jacob waited for the inefficient sensors to grind to a halt. "Have you ever turned up any?"

"Certainly not with this device. There were Strangers about in the old days, and I might have run into a few during the sweeps. But hard to say. Back then they had these tag lines attached to every communication, 'If they're not a Friend, they might be a Stranger.' Remember those? Of course not—you're far too young. In any case, we were told they were all about. Problem is they were, are, so hard to identify. Has the process gotten any easier? Surely, with all the advances."

Jacob wondered what advances the old man could have been talking about. People could be so gullible out on the reaches. "Not that I know of. I've never seen a Stranger myself. Friends all, I suppose."

The aging officer stared at him. "You shouldn't make light of such things. I'm surprised that you haven't seen one of the enemy, as much as you travel. Do you have word, official of course, on the progress of the war?"

Jacob had the uneasy feeling that the man might keep him quarantined and under scan if he didn't provide a satisfactory answer. He wished he had Anders's ability at complete fabrication. His ear buzzed. *The war ebbs and flows, but remains constant. The empire continues to maintain.* Ashamed of himself, Jacob repeated command's answer word for word.

"Very well then." The officer motioned and Jacob was propelled forward up the ramp. The man's hand thrust forward, gripping his arm. "Welcome to our humble landing. Anya—Officer Bolduan—is preparing the statistical feed. Any specific observations you'd like to make?"

"Not really, as I was explaining to the other officer I'm only here two sleeps."

"Very well. You do realize your sleep regulation isn't enforced here. If you'd like to

continue your accustomed sleep cycle you can return to your vessel at the appropriate intervals—”

“I’d like to give it a try.”

“Certainly. Some have a difficult time transitioning.” The officer looked down suddenly, as if intent on something on the instrument panel. “Do you have messages to deliver?” he asked without looking up.

Buzz. 432 *undelivered regulatory messages*. Jacob shook his head in annoyance. “There are a few, probably obsolete, regulatory messages.”

The officer laughed to himself. “Well, we hardly need more of those.” He wetted his lips. “Anything for specific persons?”

Buzz. *Specific name is required for an adequate search. Misdirects now at over 62% due to addressing and time-delimiting malfunctions.*

“I’m not sure. I will certainly—”

“My father is retiring tomorrow,” Anya spoke up, entering from the hall. “He’s been waiting for his letter from the emperor.”

They skittered across the dull-sealed surface of the world in a shallow vehicle looking somewhat like a huge sandal. An old geo-magnetic skimmer, as far as he could tell, although it had a home-made, jerry-built feel. Regulation replacement parts were unheard of out here (or in most of the empire, if the full truth were known). Now and then they’d pass over a deteriorated portion of the coating and the skimmer would fishtail with a twittering sound.

“It’s really more stable than it seems.” She was obviously amused by his discomfort. “I’m sorry about my father back there.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong. You embarrassed him.”

She sighed. “Yes, I’m afraid I did. It’s just that he’s been waiting for that stupid letter for so long, and I knew he’d never ask about it directly.”

“Well, yes, I surmised that. The way he began immediately apologizing for your uniform, and his, obviously to change the subject. ‘My uniform is currently twenty-two points out of color phase. Officer Anya Bolduan’s is currently thirty-six points out of color phase.’”

“The sad thing is he tracks those figures every day, and at the end of the month he graphs the progress. He worries about that sort of thing. It’s like he expects my uniform will turn transparent in another year.”

Jacob thought he might actually blush. The notion filled him with self-loathing. He couldn’t look at her. “They’re old uniforms. It can’t be helped. I don’t suppose it even matters.”

“It matters very much to my father. And he only has another day for it to matter. So, is there a letter, Crewman Reporter Jacob Westman? Do you know anything, or is it all in that thing in your ear?”

She might not have seen his kind before, but she read manuals. “Patience, please. My ear is attempting to tell me what it knows.”

*Letters from the emperor were given at one time to higher officers, including provisional officers in charge of outposts and settlements, upon the occasion of their retirement. The practice has been largely discontinued, declining rapidly as chains of command have become increasingly ambivalent. Rarely did such letters receive the emperor’s personal attention. Last recorded incident of such a letter . . . records here are incomplete.*

“He knew the emperor at one time,” she said. “They were friends. He served with him when they were both young. I think that’s why he has his hopes so high.”

*Monitoring this statement due to its high probability of fabrication. Positing truthfulness, such a relationship might possibly make a difference. Is it a friendship? Please note the lower case “f.” Probabilities difficult to determine, high inaccuracy due*



to questions as to whether a singular figure known as the "emperor" in fact now exists. Parameters classified.

"Does your ear need more time?"

"Apparently. I'm sorry."

"So how does it feel, having that voice in your head all the time? I can't manage even the low volume of communications we deal with on Joy. Don't tell my father, but sometimes I unplug."

"Truthfully it becomes annoying at times. But it is," he stopped, watched her eyes, "company."

She nodded. "It does get lonely here, you know. Even after all this time, the older staff will be talking to you, and it feels like a genuine conversation, then suddenly they're treating you like you were a Stranger."

"From my observations in these outlying posts, that isn't unusual behavior."

"So are they still out there?"

*... speculations here are ill-advised ...*

"Honestly, I really have no idea. Possibly."

"Is the emperor even still alive? We never hear anything out here."

*... lack of complete information is no excuse for misleading statements by crewmembers acting in their official capacity ...*

"I'm afraid I can't help you there, either. Some things work, I know that. We receive communications, including new regulations and orders. Although infrequently, supply ships arrive at destinations." Com buzzed his ear aggressively, but he ignored it. "Other military ships are encountered. The empire runs, although its borders apparently continue to change. And from my observation, most of the settlements appear to be running themselves. Maybe there's still an emperor, maybe there's a committee. People talk about the Strangers, but no one I know has ever seen one. Some people say there are no Strangers, and no emperor either."

"Well, there *was* an emperor. My father knew him. He says in the old days before he took command the emperor was expected to serve just like everyone else."

"He must have some interesting stories from that time."

The world's surface coating stopped abruptly, and the skimmer almost as quickly. The unsettled portion of Joy rolled out in front of them, its multicolored layers of stone swirling into cones, peaks, and shallow valleys. The late-afternoon light emphasized its strangeness, and its random highlighting of geologic features gave the landscape an appearance of constant movement.

"Very pretty," he said, feeling inadequate to the task of responding to such an exotic vision.

"Yes, but I'm afraid that ends the tour. Bad enough I go out there by myself without orders, but if you were to be injured—you can imagine, I'm sure. But it has such beauty and strangeness—I'm not sure I could handle so much Joy without it." She laughed. "That was a silly thing to say, I guess."

He wanted to tell her how much he enjoyed hearing her laughter, but of course did not. "You stay because of your father?"

"He retires tomorrow and I'm supposed to take over. Maybe then we can stretch things a bit, and I can find excuses to go out there more. Besides, he needs me for now. There are so many things he's unsure of."

"I can't promise any particular results, but I'll keep searching for some sort of message, at least some official recognition of his retirement."

"He *knew* the emperor, I'm sure of it. My father isn't the sort of person to fabricate things."

*... fabrication is always a potential hazard when inadequate information is present ...*

"I believe you."

"But he doesn't have any *stories*. His memory stops after meeting the emperor, going out on those first tentative incursions. At some point his entire platoon came back with the emperor, and the powers that he must have suspected a Stranger was among them, because they were all examined, if that's even an adequate word for it. He's lost most of his memories of that period, and although his official record provides dates and locations, details are sparse."

*... possibilities of message retrieval using insufficient search parameters are questionable ...*

"I hope a message comes through. I'll return to the ship, spend the rest of the day in queries."

"Even if you can't find anything, please come to the ceremony tomorrow? Having someone from outside in attendance, in official capacity or not—"

"Of course. Of course. I'll be there," he said, even though the idea of standing with in a gathering of people he did not know made him cringe.

That evening he sat alone in the recording room in the hours before enforced sleep, as he would sit alone before many sleeps until the powers above (and there were thousands of layers, he thought, of powers above) chose someone to replace Anders. As he had sat alone time after time when Anders had still been alive and only a few meters away, simply another stranger listening for voices in the dark, recording what those voices had to say. Tonight there were a thousand such voices, most chronicling the minutiae of rulings and orders, specifications and principles, some calling out for contact from worlds not visited in generations, some pleading for assistance, remuneration, or the simple return of a greeting, and a few hesitant inquiries concerning Strangers, and fewer still wondering aloud if Strangers had at last taken over all that could be seen, heard, or imagined. The emperor himself, however, was conspicuously silent, as he had been silent, and invisible, all of Jacob's life. The possibility the sought-after letter might miraculously arrive seemed almost infinitely remote.

"Continue to parse and deliver all incoming and previously uncategorized communications," Jacob said aloud. "But please intersperse with entries from the diaries of Anders Nils."

Command remained silent, as it had all evening, but swiftly complied.

The hall where the ceremony was held was small, but so was the attendance. Official banners had been hung, each one a few points off in color as far as Jacob could determine, lending a not-entirely unpleasant but unmistakable disharmony to the proceedings.

The walls cycled images of the retiring colonel at various points in his career, but there were numerous, obvious gaps. A few of the images portrayed groups of officers and enlisted. Jacob wondered if any of the blurred, shadowed faces was that of their emperor.

People stood up one at a time and offered chronicles of their experiences serving with the colonel. Some talked about his skills as an administrator, a supervisor. One or two said he was a visionary, but provided no evidence for this claim. A man appearing older than the colonel told a semi-humorous story of their time serving together in the campaigns, but stopped abruptly and sat down. Jacob then realized the man must have also been part of the group suffering the examination which had scattered the colonel's memories.

Anya stood and told everyone what a good father he had been. She talked about his patience, and how much she respected him. When she sat down Jacob saw her warily eyeing the thin sheet of film Jacob held in his shaking hand.

"Is there anyone else?" a small man in a faded clerk's uniform asked.

Jacob stood and unsteadily made his way to the front of the room. When he turned around he looked for someone to focus on. He discovered he couldn't begin to look at the colonel, but watching Anya's face as he read was pleasant and barely possible. He held the sheet tightly to minimize the shaking.

"The vast spaces between us are filled with messages. In these scattered times few seem to find their intended destinations, or satisfy us with the things we've always wanted to hear. But sometimes you can stitch together a voice here, a voice there, until some clarity of feeling emerges. I cannot vouch for the complete accuracy of what I am about to read—it is difficult to verify the messages that come to us out of the vast unknown. But I intuit its general true feeling.

"To Colonel William Bolduan, officer in custody of Joy, from Joseph, once acquaintance and always friend, emperor of all he loves, hates, or imagines, on the occasion of the colonel's retirement from a lifetime of most meritorious service.

"Now, you may not remember because of measures taken both terrible and necessary, but when I hungered so long for sustenance, and courage, you made us a meal out of the wings of some glorious bird whose name was unfamiliar to all, whose face bore a map of the hard world we'd traveled, and while we ate, our eyes became like white jewels, and we paid each other out of laughter and song. For us there were no soldiers or emperors, no desperate orders or misguided honor to separate us, and we swore to each other the peace that comes with age. I would stand by you as your children were married, and we would tolerate no serious disagreement, and think nothing of the worlds that separated us, but praise the fineness of difference.

"When we woke I could see your embarrassment, the shame you felt for being so familiar, and you would not hear when I explained what all emperors know, that sometimes the heart must be lubricated if any truth is to be told.

"Still, we were no strangers to adventure. We were not strangers in our hearts. Without regret I followed you into the fires at Weilung, where the breath of the dying fliers erased our uniforms and then our hair. In agony you carried me to the fountains of that fading world, where those beautiful ghosts regretted our injuries, and we lay swaddled in their manes as the battles raged without us, until finally I could open my eyes without screaming, and you had that ship waiting, and past the eighty-two falls of those unfortunate worlds you transported me, until the rest of the fleet arrived, and there began our first separation.

"And you should know my people thought it improper. They called themselves my people but in truth I was irretrievably theirs. Some beings must remain separate, they told me, and a friendship of equals is a lie we tell children. So I had to content myself with reports of your exploits, your rescue mission between the two green seas, the time you brought the children (those oh-so-gullible children!) out of the mines at Debel Schian, and your long voyage out of the Cheylen clouds.

"If you could only remember our next meeting at the Hejen Temples! How broken I was over those jokes you told! I painted my cheeks like a little girl, and danced until you were too hoarse to sing. Later, when you were afraid your honor could not bear such frivolous and insane behavior, I somehow convinced you that sometimes insanity is the only reasonable response to atrocity, and the death of everything, and long voyages home, alone in the dark.

"But all this ends. And even I with such a grand, fully augmented memory, cannot remember the last time we laughed together, any more than you, my friend. It all has to end. And strangeness comes, and there is no science deep enough to explicate the secrets of the heart. An empire separates us, but still I think of you.

"Signed Joseph, your emperor."

Jacob returned immediately to his ship. His dialogue with command continued in the recording room, even as the vessel departed that atmosphere, trailing unanswered messages from the occupants of Joy.

"This is a continuation of queries related to the death of Anders Nils, crewman reporter third. Are you prepared to answer these queries?"

"Ask me anything. You may also repeat questions from our first session. Obviously, I have nothing better to do."

"Before proceeding to those queries we would like to ask you some possibly related questions concerning your stay on 960G4-32."

"Yes, I imagine you do."

"The letter you read from the Emperor Joseph—that was a complete fabrication, was it not?"

"Yes, a complete fabrication."

"The letter was fabricated from fabrications previously entered by Anders Nils in his diaries, concerning imaginary adventures you and he experienced while visiting a variety of worlds."

"Yes, that was the principal source—Anders's imaginary adventures and the imaginary friendship he invented for us. But I filled it in with a few details from the colonel's service record, some stray descriptive passages from this soup of transmissions I have travelled in these past nine years. The style came out of Li Po's *Exile's Letter*. Have you read it?"

"The poem is in the database."

"I admit I've hardly done it justice."

"So you admit the emperor's letter was a lie?"

Jacob waited, thinking, then said, "It is not a lie. It is an accurate depiction of the way Anders Nils felt about me, felt about the loneliness of the voyage. It is an accurate depiction of his yearnings. I also believe it is an accurate depiction of Colonel Bolduan's yearnings, and perhaps those of our maybe-living, maybe-not emperor as well. It is certainly an accurate depiction of my own feelings."

"But the events you've narrated, events which were supposedly experienced by Colonel Bolduan, are fictional."

"Those events, those memories are gone forever. They were taken from the colonel. If the colonel had lost a leg in combat, the service would have provided him with a prosthetic. The events I have narrated in the emperor's letter are a prosthetic for what he has lost."

"Do you know why Anders would commit suicide?"

"I cannot be sure. I will never be sure. But I believe the stories he had made up, or fabricated, to use your word, had ceased to work for him. He must have been terribly, terribly lonely."

"He should have spoken to you. He could have asked us for assistance."

"Some people are unable to ask, or tell. People do what they can do."

"Why did you not know Anders was thinking of committing suicide?"

"Because I failed at the one thing I have been so thoroughly trained to do. I failed to listen."

And there ended the interview. Jacob returned to his long nights listening, alone, waiting for Anders's replacement, wondering if there would even be a replacement. Now and then he would listen to Anders's diaries. Now and then he would make up diary entries of his own.

Command wrapped up its report and transmitted it into the empty space between its reported location and a vague approximation of the location called home, not knowing, or caring, if contact was made. ○

# WONDER HOUSE

Chris Roberson

Chris Roberson's new tale fits into the same divergent history of the new world that imagined an Aztec and Mandarin supremacy as his earlier *Asimov's* stories, "Red Hands, Black Hands" (December 2004) and "The Sky Is Large and the Earth Is Small" (July 2007). It takes added inspiration from Gerard Jones's *Men of Tomorrow*, a book that "makes plain the ways in which Eastern European Jewish immigrants were responsible for the birth of one of the only truly American art forms."

The author's most recent novels include two that were published in 2008—*Iron Jaw and Hummingbird* (Viking) and *The Dragon's Nine Sons* (Solaris)—and three from 2009—*End of the Century* (Pyr), *Three Unbroken* (Solaris), and *Dawn of War II* (Games Workshop).

**"T**hat's it, I'm quitting the business!"

Yacov Leiber was unconcerned, to say the least. In the twenty years since the two of them had founded Wonder House Publications, his partner Itzhak Blumenfeld had loudly pronounced his resignation from publishing at least once a year, sometimes several times in a single season. While it was *possible* that this time it would stick, and Wonder House would be left without a publisher, Yacov didn't consider it terribly likely.

"Going to be a milliner like your father, I presume?" he said calmly, stubbing out his cigarette in the tin ashtray on the corner of his desk.

Itzhak glowered across the office at his partner, almost biting through the cigar clenched between his teeth. "I *could*, you know. You don't think I could sell hats?"

Yacov chuckled, pulling another cigarette from his pocket. "Sure, sure, Itzhak, whatever you say."

Itzhak stomped back from the door and collapsed in the upholstered chair in the corner. Though he held the title "publisher" and Yacov the title "accountant," in reality the two were equal partners in Wonder House, co-regents who'd ruled this burgeoning publishing empire since they'd been much younger men. They spent so much time talking over operations in each other's offices that Yacov had once suggested that they could conserve space and the time spent walking up and down the halls if they simply shared a single office. Itzhak had been baffled by the suggestion.

"And how would *that* look?" he said simply, as though that were all that need be said on the subject.

There had been a moment, before the war on Fire Star, when Wonder House looked set to overtake Best Publications as the second largest publisher of popular entertainments in the world, on track perhaps to one day overtake even Silver Star. But with the outbreak of the Second Mexic War, their fortunes had turned, and they gradually began to lose market share. Now they were struggling to hang onto the number three spot, their standing little better than it had been in their first years of operation.

"Why did I ever decide to go into terribles?" Itzhak put his head in his hands and moaned. "I should have listened to my mother and stuck with circulars and advertising supplements."

It was an accident of history that the three largest publishers of "tenth-tael terribles"—or "popular entertainments," as Yacov preferred to call them—were all located within less than a kilometer of each other in the city of Yerushalayim. Well, an accident of history that *two* of them were located there. Wonder House had been founded *because* the first two were there.

Itzhak and Yacov hadn't even been born when Silver Star and Best first built the tenth-tael terrible from a small sideline in their "legitimate" publishing endeavors into one of the most successful forms of popular entertainment in the world. By the time Yacov and Itzhak had immigrated with their parents to Yisrael after a failed revolution collapsed the Romanian economy, the names of the two major Yisraeli publishers were synonymous with cheaply produced popular entertainments, stories of adventure and mystery, romance and intrigue beneath lurid cover illustrations.

If it had been an *accident* of history that Silver Star and Best were both in Yerushalayim, though, it was *strategy* that put Wonder House on the map. Itzhak and Yacov had met when they'd been little more than children in the streets of Yerushalayim, hungry to make a name for themselves in a country that still seemed like a foreign land to them in so many ways. They'd been infants when their parents had come to the shores of Yisrael, but they still felt like outsiders, their Yiddish heavily accented with the tones of Romania.

Growing up in Yisrael, Itzhak and Yacov had been avid readers of tenth-tael terribles, and consumed stories of flying aces, and Vinlander gunslingers, and spies of the Eastern Depot, stories of detection and espionage and intrigue, of dutiful workers and hopping vampires. They knew too well the frustration of the young writers and artists they met in the coffee-houses of Yerushalayim, eager to break into publishing but unable to do so while most of the existing jobs were held by salaried employees who were in no hurry to retire.

The young Yacov had access to the small fortune that his late father had amassed in his tailor's trade, while Itzhak, personable and gregarious, had a large circle of writer and artist friends. They made the acquaintance of a widower whose family operated a paper mill, and a young man who had inherited from his grandfather a struggling printing business. If they could not break into the existing publishing houses, they would just create their own. And so was born Wonder House.

"We could hold another contest," Yacov suggested, but one look at his partner's expression made clear what Itzhak thought about *that*. Sometimes their most prolific writers would be hired up by Silver Star or Best, who were not above poaching the competition's talent. But if Wonder House saw its talent pool beginning to dry up, Itzhak would simply announce another contest in the pages of their publications, open to all new writers, with the winning story given the honor of being published—along with a "cash prize" valued considerably below the standard professional rate for writers, of course. It cut costs, but stories by untested writers did little to build sales or shore up the existing readership.

In the early days of Wonder House, their problems had seemed insurmountable, but now Yacov would swap places with his younger self in a *heartbeat*. What did they have to worry about back then, distribution? Sure, it had been a problem at first, but an alliance with a family from Ella seeking a legitimate front for their smuggling operation provided the solution. In short order, Wonder House was self-distributing, and if mixed among the bundles of tenth-tael terribles were items of a somewhat less-than-legal variety—intoxicants, pornography, and other such contraband—a few bribes in the hand of customs inspectors were usually enough to purchase a blind eye or two, and the trucks and ships that went out on deliveries invariably came back in the end.

If only a few handy bribes were enough to keep the *readers* coming back.

"Then how about another war title?" Yacov said, head wreathed in grey smoke from the cigarette dangling from his lip. "Sales on *Air & Space Stories* are still healthy enough, maybe we can float a companion title."

"Enough with the war titles!" Itzhak crossed his arms over his chest, gnawing on the unlit cigar between his teeth. "I'm sick from the war titles we've already got."

In the earliest days of Wonder House, war stories had been one of the most popular genres in publishing, and Itzhak and Yacov had been quick to introduce their own contributions to the field. *Air Stories* was chief among them, filled with the daring exploits of the Imperial Navy of the Air during the days of the First Mexic War, ace squadrons like the Flying Immortals, the Golden Dragons, and the Spirits of the Upper Air, brave aeronauts who faced down the deadly airships of the Mexic Dominion's Eagle Knights. Of course, that was back when it had just been the Mexic War, without any need for the "first." After the outbreak of the *Second Mexic War*, Wonder House and its competitors tried to update their war stories by bringing their characters and series up to the present day, and transplanting the action from Earth to Fire Star. Wonder House retitled *Air Stories* to *Air & Space Stories*, but the contents were the same old potboilers they'd always published, only with the red skies of Fire Star instead of the blue skies over Mexica. As the Second Mexic War continued to grind on, though, audiences seemed to lose interest in stories of glamorous aces who never seemed to get shot down or wounded, especially with the news of the day so often occupied with the casualty reports from the red planet. Families who had lost a son, brother, or father to war were less able to find such stories very glamorous.

"Okay," Yacov said, taking a drag from his cigarette, "how about another gunslinger title? Sales of *Tejas Frontier* are pretty solid, and we could probably find room for another one on the stands."

"No, no," Itzhak said, "that stuff was tired when *we* were kids. And don't get me started on exorcism titles again, either. I swear if I never have to read another story about a hopping vampire again in my entire life, it will *still* be too soon." He paused, considering. "What about a character title, like Doctor Buckingham?"

Yacov pulled a face. Silver Star had made their name through the "character titles," popular entertainments that featured the same set of characters in every issue. It was harder—*much* harder—to manage that kind of operation with freelancers instead of staff writers. Silver Star's *Doctor Buckingham*, a "white peril" title about a Briton criminal genius who orchestrated a worldwide network of crime and terror like a spider in its web, was a sales blockbuster, and Wonder House would be lucky to have such a success in their stable, but past attempts to launch character titles had been met with little success. Still, if that was the price they had to pay for freelancers, Yacov was more than willing to pay it.

When Itzhak and Yacov first got in the business, Silver Star and Best Publications had a corner on the terribles market, all of their titles written in the Dragon Throne's Official Speech to appeal to the widest possible audience, penned by



salaried employees of the two houses who turned out stories to order, with illustrations inside and out by staff artists.

From the beginning, the two friends decided that all of Wonder House's writers and artists would be freelance, not salaried. Not having to ensure salaries and retirement benefits meant that they could afford to pay higher rates, which was more attractive to young writers who considered themselves immortal, anyway. And since they would not be supplying offices for their writers, they could just as easily commission stories from writers in other cities, even other countries, who could simply send their work to Wonder House by post. And since they and the few employees they'd hired on at the print shop were all second-generation Yisraelis, and between them they could read and write in a half-dozen different languages, they didn't require their writers to work in Official Speech, but could instead write in whichever language they spoke, and Wonder House would translate it before publication into the emperor's Official Speech.

It hardly seemed to matter. Few readers of the "Judge Xi" stories in Wonder House's *Tales of Detection* that were so popular in the Middle Kingdom imagined that the stories were written by a Briton who didn't speak a word of Official Speech.

"I don't know about character titles, Itzhak," Yacov said. "It would depend. I mean, we'd have to have the *right* character, for one, and . . ." Yacov let his voice trail off with a wave of his hand, a familiar gesture that suggested, but did not invite, a much lengthier discussion. "We *could* think about relaunching *Celestial Bureaucracy*."

Now it was Itzhak's turn to pull a face. When they'd founded Wonder House, one of their earliest titles had been *Celestial Bureaucracy*, a monthly series that featured the stirring tales of men and women who overcame personal adversity through dogged adherence to the teachings of Master Kong, and who, by exhibiting proper ritual, filial piety, and loyalty to the Dragon Throne, rose in the bureaucracy and attained some exalted position in the emperor's service. In some of the stories things were taken even further, and readers were regaled with the details of the positions these noble workers achieved in the afterlife, serving the celestial government in the afterworld as they had served the Celestial Emperor in life.

*Celestial Bureaucracy* had been just one of countless "bureaucrats" on the stands, but somehow the title had proved popular—for a time. After a few years, though, the bureaucrat craze went through one of its periodic declines, and readership of such titles fell across the board. Soon Silver Star was canceling its entire line of bureaucrat titles, soon followed by Best. Only Wonder House continued to publish them, long after the market appeared to have evaporated entirely, at Itzhak's insistence. It was his belief that the readers would come back, and find *Celestial Bureaucracy* there waiting for them.

The readers never did come back, or at least they hadn't yet, and so *Celestial Bureaucracy* had been kept waiting, and waiting, and waiting. They'd finally pulled the plug on the title only a few years before, by which time their sales had slipped to virtually nothing. It was a sore point with Itzhak, especially considering the mockery Wonder House had endured from the editors at Silver Star and Best for continuing to insist that the bureaucrats' readership was coming back.

Of course, both men *knew* that the bureaucrats' readership would come back, eventually. The readers always came back, sooner or later, they were certain of that. But at this point they were just as certain that Wonder House would not be the first to dive back into those particular waters.

"What about that title Moischel was pitching?" Itzhak answered, not deigning to answer his partner's suggestion about *wuxia*. "That Turkiye thing?"

"*Tales of the Osmanli Empire*?"

Itzhak gestured with the end of his soggy cigar, nodding. "Right, that thing." He paused and shrugged noncommittally. "It would sell in Turkiye, at least."

"And Parsa, maybe," Yacov said, tapping a lengthening ash from the end of his cigarette. "They might like it in Suriya, too." It was no secret that not everyone in the world was happy to be governed by the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom, and not all of them were blood-worshipping Mexica, either. There were many in the states that had resulted from the collapse of Turkiye's former empire—in Ghazza, Masr, Parsa, Suriya, perhaps even a silent few in Yisrael itself—who would have preferred that the Osmanli Empire had never fallen, and that they were governed not from the Dragon Throne but instead from the Sublime Porte. A nostalgic look back at the glory days of the Osmanli would be well received by such a readership.

Of course, there were also those Yisraelis who were dissatisfied with the fact that theirs was a secular state, and who agitated for the government to be replaced by a theocracy and all ties to the Middle Kingdom severed. Itzhak and Yacov hardly paid much attention to such things, except inasmuch as they impacted the terribles trade. They were secular men, interested in secular things. Even so, there were some lines they would not cross.

"No," Itzhak said after a moment's pause, "we can't."

"You're right," Yacov nodded. "It *would* sell, but still . . ." It had been centuries since the Osmanli Empire had broken up, after Ella led the charge in breaking away from the control of the Sublime Porte, but still there were many in Yisrael who harbored grudges against their former Osmanli masters. "We could take another look at Kaplan's Embroidered Guard idea, I suppose."

Itzhak puffed up his cheeks and blew through puckered lips—the resulting sound, uncannily like the noise of flatulence, was his shorthand for "We could, but do we have to?"

"I know there was that one house that the Eastern Depot investigated," Yacov continued, "but that doesn't mean that . . ."

Yacov was saved from making the case that publishing stories about the Emperor's secret police wouldn't *automatically* ensure that Wonder House would come under imperial scrutiny—though he had to admit that it *would* increase their chances—when he was interrupted by the sound of a knock at the door.

"Come in." He sat back in his chair, leaving the cigarette in the ashtray. When he saw the round face at the door, soft chin and thick glasses, he sighed. "Yeah, Segal, what's it this time?"

Segal was a local kid, like Itzhak and Yacov a second-generation Yisraeli, but from an entirely *different* generation. He wanted to be a writer, and had been submitting stories to Wonder House since he was old enough to hold a pen in his hand, but, by the age of twenty, had only sold one or two stories—and Yacov *still* couldn't get his head around the fact that Segal hadn't even been born yet when he and Itzhak went into business together.

"Mr. Leiber, sir?" Segal poked his head in the door, then caught sight of Itzhak sitting in the corner, glowering around his sodden cigar. "Oh, Mr. Blumenfeld, I didn't know you were here. I can come back later and . . ."

"Itzhak is *always* here, Segal," Yacov said, waving the young man in. "Now come on, don't take all day."

Segal came in, and following close behind came Kurtzberg, a short pit-bull with thick brows and muscular arms, who always seemed to have a pen clenched between his teeth, just in case. A few years Segal's senior, Kurtzberg was one of Wonder House's regular interior illustrators. He had come to them originally looking for cover work, but he just didn't seem to have the grasp of anatomy that covers required. But if he wasn't ready for paints just yet, he was lightning fast with pen-and-ink, and, as odd as his anatomy drawing could get, it was good enough for interior work.

"Let me guess," Itzhak said from the corner, taking the cigar from his mouth. "You have an *idea*."

For more than a year, Segal had been coming into the Wonder House offices every few months with his latest big idea, always convinced that *this* would be the one to get him regular work writing for the terribles. He always insisted that his ideas were gold-mines, and every one of them the *best* big idea he'd ever had. It had been a few months since he'd last been around the offices, and Yacov had started to imagine that maybe the kid had finally run out of "best big ideas." It appeared he'd been overly optimistic.

"Y-yes," Segal managed, fumbling with the sheaf of papers in his hands, only narrowly avoiding spilling them all over the office floor. "As a matter of fact . . ."

"We've been working on this thing," Kurtzberg said, tapping the artboards under his arm with one of his thick fingers, "and we think maybe it'd be a good fit for Wonder House."

Yacov waved Segal over and took the sheaf of handwritten manuscript pages from him, while Itzhak motioned for Kurtzberg to hand him the boards. As he fanned through the boards, some covered with paintings in oils and others with pen-and-ink sketches, Itzhak whistled low. "You've been doing all this *and* keeping up with all your deadlines? Kurtzberg, you're a *machine*."

The young artist shrugged, the faintest hint of a smile tugging up one corner of his mouth. "Eh, I'm quick, so what?"

"What am I looking at here?" Yacov asked, scanning down the first of the handwritten pages, wincing at Segal's questionable penmanship. The kid wrote in Official Speech, but was so shaky with the pen that it looked like it could have been meant to be Yiddish.

"We've got this idea for a character . . ." Kurtzberg began.

"He's from the future, see," Segal cut in, hands on Yacov's desk and leaning forward eagerly. "He's the son of the last man on Earth, and he gets sent back in this time machine just before the red sun explodes!"

Itzhak held up a pen-and-ink sketch of a muscled figure holding a car up over his head. "Come on, a *car*? Really?"

"Gravity's stronger in the future," Kurtzberg answered, a touch of defiance in his tone. "So when he comes back to the present day it's like, what if there was a guy who was as strong as an Earth-man is on the moon . . . but here on Earth? He can make big jumps, pick up cars, that kind of thing."

"I don't know, guys . . ." Yacov pulled another cigarette from the pack in his pocket, and lit it from a table-lighter. "The *future*?"

Segal blanched, tight-lipped. It looked like he could see his last chance slipping through his fingers.

"What's this for?" Itzhak said. He held up an art board covered in oil paints. Depicted in Kurtzberg's over-bright colors and blocky anatomy was a muscular figure wearing a skin-tight costume, white with dark sky-blue highlights, like he was wrapped in the flag of Yisrael. On his chest was a triangular shield, in which was emblazoned the Hebrew letter Shin, and it was to this that Itzhak was pointing.

"It stands for 'Shaddai,'" Kurtzberg answered.

"The Almighty," Segal translated into Yiddish, unnecessarily.

Itzhak nodded, turning his attention back to the pen-and-ink sketches.

Yacov held the manuscript pages out to Segal. "There are some . . . interesting ideas in here, but the writing just doesn't have what it takes, and . . ."

"Hold on," Itzhak interrupted, holding up a finger. "I think these boys may have something here." He caught the hard look Yacov was giving him, motioning with the manuscript pages. "Sure, it's rough, but there's potential. But I don't see this as a standard story with a few spot illustrations. No." He held up the pen-and-ink sketch-

es. "These may not look much like any human body I've ever seen, but damned if they don't *move*. Here's how I see it—a big pen-and-ink piece on every page, maybe even a few of them arranged in order like a filmstrip. Then we cut Segal's text into snippets and just paste it on top of the drawings."

"You're joking," Yacov said, but he could already see the wheels moving behind his partner's eyes.

"No, no," Itzhak said, jumping up out of the chair and starting to pace the floor. "This could be the series character we've been looking for, Yacov. This could work."

Across the office Kurtzberg and Segal were already huddling, trying to figure out how to give Itzhak what he was asking for. Stories where the pictures carried as much weight as the words?

Yacov could see that the train had already left the station, and that Wonder House had its new title. They'd have to work out the details, of course. They couldn't very well pay Kurtzberg their regular illustration rate if he was going to be churning out ten times as many illustrations as normal, but at least Segal wouldn't be earning much if he only wrote a handful of words per story. There'd be the question of ownership, of course—Silver Star owned all their series characters outright, and it only made sense for Wonder House to do the same. Who knew? Maybe they'd break with tradition and put the two kids on salary in exchange for their rights. That would be a fair trade, as Yacov saw it.

None of that mattered now, though. Segal and Kurtzberg were already working out the first story, paring down the handwritten manuscript until it was barer than a drama's script. And Itzhak was standing in the middle of the office, sodden cigar chomped between his teeth, staring out into the middle distance. Yacov had seen that stare before, and knew just what it was that his partner was looking at—the future.

"Yeah," Itzhak said in a far-off voice. "This could *work*." ○

## DoT Acolytes

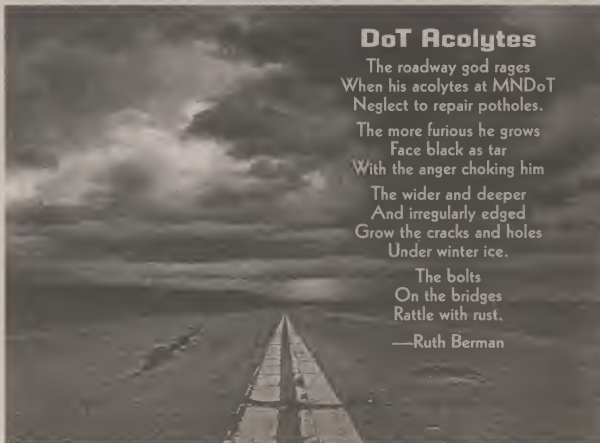
The roadway god rages  
When his acolytes at MNDot  
Neglect to repair potholes.

The more furious he grows  
Face black as tar  
With the anger choking him

The wider and deeper  
And irregularly edged  
Grow the cracks and holes  
Under winter ice.

The bolts  
On the bridges  
Rattle with rust.

—Ruth Berman



Of his latest tale, Robert Reed says, "Once in my life have I gone overseas. The flight was awful, but France was lovely. Watching recent political events, I asked myself, 'What if we weren't talking about bombing the Iranian nuclear program, but instead were aiming at people that we know a good deal better? What would be the mentality in that kind of world? Would our good nature or bad push the red button?'" These questions and other unsettling issues are chillingly explored in . . .

# THE GOOD HAND

Robert Reed

**T**here was confusion in Booking, my reservation mysteriously lost in the ether. The bloodless beauty behind the counter explained that I could wait for tomorrow's flight out of Chicago, or, "You can sit with the other sheep and pray for no-shows." Her phrasing, not mine. I chose the flock, putting my name in the pool before calling the office to make appropriate warnings. But a lot of travelers were changing plans, what with the recent events. The big DC-Freedom wasn't even two-thirds full, and I was able to snag an aisle seat. Unfortunately a lot of us seemed to be suffering from spring colds and hacking coughs. One tall and very pretty Japanese-American woman caught my eye, but she claimed three seats across the aisle. Apparently those two little boys were hers. "Oh well," I thought, "at least they're behaving themselves." But the toddler began wailing on takeoff, while his older, craftier brother used the distraction to slip free of the seat belt, running amok while we cut through the evening sky.

Even with the coughing and the motherly screaming and the wild boy who kept sprinting past every few moments, I managed to sleep. But then came the realization that one of my neighbors had eaten something vicious or rancid, and now he or she was dying of some brutal intestinal ailment. Whatever the cause, whoever the source, at unpredictable moments the stuffy damp air suddenly filled with the most noxious stink imaginable, and my body and mind would be dragged out of whatever snoozing state it had achieved in the last little while.

Of course I blamed the rad-hunter sitting on my left. There were at least six agents scattered about the cabin, each dressed in the black uniform trimmed with smoky orange lines. A small woman, plain-faced and in no obvious pain, she gave herself away by never acting surprised by the outrage hovering in the air. Of course she could have assumed that I was the culprit, and she was a polite sort of creature. But I have met one or two rad-hunters, and they are not polite people. Their job demands self-centered, disagreeable natures, treating the world with all of the scorn it

will endure; and if she wasn't the source of this biohazard, I'm sure at the very least she would have stood and moved somewhere else.

At this point, I will mention that I'm not a political soul.

I was a traveler, an innocent with business on his mind, and this was only my third trip overseas, and I had never seen France. And I would see little of it now, what with the demands of my work and an exceptionally tight schedule.

Landing at De Gaulle brought new difficulties. There didn't seem to be room at the terminal, so our plane was ushered onto a side runway, buses gathering slowly to carry us the final half-mile of our journey. Yet that complication didn't bother me. In my present mood, I would have accepted a parachute and the attendant's boot to my ass, if it meant escaping that coffin. The afternoon air tasted of rain and leaked fuel. I sat patiently on a bus that refused to go anywhere. I watched the pretty mother spank one boy and then his brother. Then just as I wondered if some new problem had arisen, the bus was accelerating, suddenly shooting across the tarmac and then slamming to a stop beside a crowded facility filled with angry passengers and heavily armed guards.

The consuming ugliness of the airport terminal was something of a marvel, what with its naked steel and concrete block construction. Where was the famous French sense of aesthetics? The little rad-hunter and her uniformed colleagues flashed badges and walked straight past the guards, ignoring and perhaps even enjoying the murderous stares. But I was a civilian. And sadly, I was American. To the limits of international law, I was to be shown the consideration usually reserved for dangerous dogs.

A gloved hand accepted my passport, and not one or two customs agents looked at it. The process required three bureaucrats and ten minutes of hard consideration before it was handed back to me. They never spoke in my direction, even in French. Knifing gestures were deemed adequate, and when I didn't jump to their commands, a gloved hand grabbed my arm, yanking me into the presence of a fourth official. "You are the guest of a nation and a great people," he reminded me. "We expect nothing but dignity and respect at all times."

With that, I was sent on my way.

I have no aptitude with languages. Which seems odd, considering that I was always one of the bright children in school. But my employers had taken my limits into account, paying extra for a translator. A young man was at the gate, holding a sign with my name and nothing else written in a neat, officious style.

"I'm Kyle Betters," I announced.

He didn't seem to believe me. Lowering the sign, he scratched at his bare chin, considering who-knew-what factors before replying with a quiet lack of feeling, "Welcome to France, Mr. Betters."

His name was Claude, and for the expected reasons we took an instant but workable dislike to one another. Small talk wasn't part of his job description. But directing me to the luggage carousel was a valid duty, and he did it without prompting, watching with thin amusement as I hung my small bag on the very big suitcase, dragging both behind me as we continued down more ugly hallways and out into a parking garage that stank of gasoline and wet concrete.

Of course his car was tiny, and of course he took offense when I laughed quietly at what looked like a toy.

His laugh came moments later, watching my middle-aged body struggle to lift my luggage into a volume just large enough to accept it.

A pattern was set. In small pointed ways, we worked to embarrass and enrage one another. Claude lit a Turkish cigarette, filling the Renault with a toxic cloud. I cracked my window, and when he mentioned his distaste for cold breezes, I rolled it down farther. The flight left me exhausted yet I was too nervous to sleep. I watched



the countryside. I studied the cars and trucks that raced along the highway. Our destination was Nancy, and I asked for a road map to better appreciate our journey across a deeply historic landscape. Claude steered me to the glove box. I opened it, finding nothing useful. That was worth a laugh, and as he drove, the hand with the cigarette tapped his head. "I know the way," he promised. "And besides, you won't see anything. It will be night soon."

In another few minutes, yes.

He drove, and I sat, keyed up to where my stomach ached.

Eventually we abandoned the wide four-lane highway, striking out east on a narrow highway in desperate need of repair. Traffic circles announced themselves with warning signs, but Claude seemed of the opinion that driving slowly brought its own risks. After the third or fourth circle, he decided that his passenger was suitably rattled. "It is unfair, you know. What you want of us."

I knew what he meant, and I was smart enough not to rise to the bait.

But he continued regardless. "Nations are free entities," he warned. "We're within our rights to do research in whatever subject we choose. How can a rational man say otherwise?"

"I haven't said anything," I pointed out.

Another cigarette needed to be lit. Exhaling in my direction, he pointed out, "We are not planning to build bombs. Why would we want such horrors?"

"Why would you?" I agreed.

But he heard something in my tone. "Uranium is a natural element. Does the United States claim ownership of a native part of our universe?"

"This isn't my area," I complained.

"Nor mine," he agreed, coaxing the little engine to run at an even higher pitch.

Holding onto my door handle, I pushed my face close to the open window and the fresh roaring air.

"Do you think we are unreasonable?"

Claude wanted me to say, "No, you are reasonable." Or maybe he hoped that like any good American, I would pick a fight. "My government is powerful, and you're going to obey us from now until Doomsday." But I didn't match either expectation. "I don't think about these political problems," I shouted back at him. "Not one way or another. Really, this whole subject doesn't mean a goddamn thing to me."

Claude fumed in the darkness.

I looked outside. By day, this was probably a scenic drive. Massive old trees were whipping past at a furious rate. Something in the moment triggered a memory. Turning back to the driver, I asked, "Do you know why the French plant so many trees along their roads?"

Claude hesitated, and then finally asked, "Why?"

"So the German army can march in the shade."

That did the trick. He wanted nothing more to do with this American, smashing his cigarette before throwing all of his concentration into getting me to my destination, as fast as possible.

My slight experience with intercontinental travel has taught me that jet lag is genuine and it is sneaky. Waking that next morning, I felt rested even though I wasn't. I felt as though my faculties had returned, but no, they were still lost out over the Atlantic somewhere. Little clues pointed to my impairment. I didn't quite recognize my hotel room, even though I was fully conscious when I checked in. The toilet's design baffled me briefly, though I'd used it the night before. A hot shower seemed to help, but the channels on the Sony television seemed to tax my intellect to its limits. There were no American networks, but even the French feed of the CBC was missing. The



nearest thing to home cooking was the BBC, and it took three minutes to appreciate just what side our British brothers were taking in the present controversy.

I shut off the television, dressed and went down to the lobby. Claude was supposed to meet me in another hour. Our day's first event was at noon—lunch with representatives for one of the largest retailers in Europe. I was nervous, which was good news. Nervousness gave me energy and a measure of courage. Knowing no French but *merci*, I headed out the front door, out into the Place Stanislas. Bits of fact crept out of my soggy memory. The plaza was two and a half centuries old, bordered by an opera house and museum and the venerable Grand Hotel where I was scheduled to remain for four busy days. I wandered south, and without getting lost or committing any major crimes, I discovered a busy restaurant that served a buffet breakfast perfectly suited to a ravenous appetite.

At some point during the meal, I realized I was being watched. It wasn't just the staff that saw my American credit card, but it was also the local patrons who seemed to recognize a tyrannical monster when they saw one. Nobody was out-and-out rude. But when I glanced at each face, they would stare back at me, showing me what silent, smoldering curiosity looks like.

Returning to my hotel, I found Claude reading *Le Monde*. My arrival was noted, but the current article was more important. He focused on every word and finished his cigarette, and then the paper was folded and the butt stamped out, and while looking at my feet, he quietly told me, "I am sorry."

I was stunned.

"For my words, my tone." He glanced at my face and then looked down again. "It is my fault that we got off so badly."

I agreed. But to be gracious, I said, "I played a hand in it."

He clearly wanted more from me.

"I'm not a traveler," I said. "My flight was awful, and I'm still hurting. I wish I had grace under pressure. But I don't. Never have."

Claude tried to make sense of my rambling confessions. Finally, needing to feel useful, he asked, "Do you wish to tour Nancy for a time? It's going to be a little while before our first event."

It was strange to hear him say, "Our first event." Just words, but the effect was to make me thankful to have an ally in this peculiar corner of the world.

But I'd mentioned being tired, and as if to prove me right, I was suddenly aware of my own endless fatigue. "I'd rather go upstairs and nap."

He glanced at his watch, a look of relief revealed.

"Perhaps so," he agreed.

"Will you come get me in an hour?"

"I shall, Mr. Betters."

But of course I didn't sleep. I lay awake, painfully aware of the brilliant sunshine pushing around the curtains of my room. This wasn't a natural time for slumber, and I accomplished nothing except feeling wearier than before. Then just as I closed my eyes—the moment that I could feel sleep take me—knuckles began to strike my room door.

What I was selling isn't important. In fact, several elements of this story are best left dressed in harmless falsehoods. Imagine several men and one woman sitting at the long table, all of them interested in American refrigerators or computers or interactive toys. What matters is that my wares weren't simple, and Europe represented a huge potential market. One difficulty is that I'm not a salesman by trade. My normal duties are to manage those responsible for designing what I consider to be the best products of their kind in the world. Which was why my enthusiasm

couldn't be faked. Despite my various liabilities, I was a good spokesman for my company, offering my audience a long-term relationship full of shared profits and room for mutual growth.

At least two guests spoke English. But everyone paid close attention while Claude turned my boastings into what was beginning to sound like real words, no matter how little of the noise made sense to me.

The man in charge knew English quite well. He was gray-haired and well dressed and probably distinguished on his worse day. With small winks and the occasional smile, he implied that he approved of what he was hearing, both from me and from Claude. In those thirty minutes, I turned from Mr. Betters into, "My friend, Kyle." But just when I felt success was assured, a young fellow at the patriarch's side leaned forward and burst into some long tirade.

Claude listened. Both of us listened. And then the one who understood turned to the other, saying, "He wants to know why this is fair? The percentages are wrong. He claims that . . ." Claude hesitated for an instant, struggling for the best words. And by "best," I mean that he needed honest words that wouldn't leave me furious. "He believes you are forcing an unfair burden on them."

"How can that be?" I asked Claude.

Claude turned and repeated that in French. But of course everyone could read my body and the tone of my voice.

Touching his headstrong young colleague, the patriarch leaned forward. In perfect English, with a deep, clear voice, he admitted, "These are difficult days, Kyle. The tensions are felt by all of us, you know."

I nodded. "Yes."

"It is sad."

I kept agreeing with him.

Then he told me, "I'm not a political soul."

Which made him just like me.

"Unlike my associates, I remember the liberation of France. I was a boy, yes, but I still remember the Nazis fleeing, and I know that joy felt by every Frenchman when your shabby-dressed soldiers entered Paris." He nodded, eyes staring into the past. "It's a fair statement to point out that no other nation, given your tools and circumstances, would have so gladly fought two wars against such distant enemies. If you wished, you could have fortified your continent, built bombers and missiles, and then littered the world with your nuclear weapons. You could have broken your enemies and their collaborators too and been done with the mess."

And now he wasn't like me. His praise buoyed me, yes. I couldn't help my emotions. But his words and cold logic made me uneasy.

"And I do respect what the United States achieved after the war," he continued. "This has not been an easy task—"

The lone woman interrupted. She was tall and elegantly beautiful, in her middle thirties but with a younger woman's perfect complexion. She knew exactly what her boss had said, and that's why she erupted into a quick rain of hot words and slicing hand gestures.

Expecting her response, the patriarch acted untroubled. When she finished, he spoke to her and the others, perhaps warning his people to behave. (I assume this because Claude translated nothing.) Then while the young people gnashed their teeth and whispered among themselves, the patriarch turned his warm certain gaze back to me. "To maintain your nuclear monopoly . . . well, it is an astonishing achievement. Granted, we have helped you in your cause. We are your allies, after all. No overt threats were necessary for us to open our borders and our military bases to your radiological police, and we have given you much help, particularly with the Soviets and the Indians."

Again, the youngsters grumbled and sneered.

The patriarch paused, weighing me with his eyes. For just a moment, he acted disappointed. Was it my expression or my silence? Either way, he sat back on the hard restaurant chair before saying the same word twice, in French and then in English.

"Peace," he uttered.

I nodded, pretending to understand his implication.

"Peace is a precious thing. And, as I say, almost any other power, given your tools, might have tried to enslave this world."

The woman had had enough. She stood, and with a delicious accent said, "Bullshit. Bullshit to that."

I felt as if I'd been slapped.

"This isn't about uranium," she told her boss. "Maybe at first it was. Maybe when the war was finished and everyone was happy, they were good stewards for the world. But these Americans . . . they do more than keep others from making atomic bombs." She turned to me, her face flushed. "He says you're honorable. I say you're sneaky and subtle and tenacious and bloodless. Like machines, you and your people keep pursuing every advantage, and what happens in the end? We surrender more and more to the United States. Because every new technology is a threat, and you believe you can make our world safe."

At that point, I laughed.

It was a mistake, and I knew it before the sound exploded from me. But a secret pride had been insulted, and sitting back in my chair, I repeated that line that I'd heard since I was a child:

"Somebody has to be in charge."

There. It was said, and no apology could take back that sentiment.

Claude was first to react. With a tight, furious voice, he said, "What about genetics? By what right should you have a monopoly on DNA?"

"What about biological weapons?" I replied.

My question was translated, and the response was nervous laughter. Only the patriarch and Claude didn't cackle at my paranoid suspicions.

"What do you think?" Claude pressed. "That if you let us toy with microbes and crops, we'd brew up plagues that would kill only Americans?"

Really, I hadn't thought for two minutes about our policy toward bacteria. But hundreds of hours of overheard news commentaries gave me the language to say, "The Soviets tried just that. When I was a boy, in the early sixties, they built that secret lab in the Urals and started to weaponize—"

I hesitated. This was probably the first time in my life that I had said that peculiar word. "Weaponize," I said again. Then I said, "Anthrax and smallpox and Ebola," with the certainty of a clinical biochemist.

"I'm not talking about disease," the woman insisted. "I'm talking about those miracle crops of yours, the biogenetic soybeans and tomatoes and rice. If a field isn't under your control, it's forbidden. If your precious seeds are lost, your spies and satellites track down the thieves, burning every field that shows any sign of your trademarked plants."

"That's not my decision," I managed.

Yet most of the table seemed to think that I was the president and Congress too, sitting before them in some kind of court proceeding.

Claude offered a few slow words to the others. Judging by the tone, he was trying to calm spirits.

But it took the patriarch to regain control of the meeting. He leaned forward, silencing the others. Something important was coming, no doubt about it. He shook his head as if it were heavy and looked at the others, and in French, he told his associ-

ates, "Of course it cannot hold, these taboos. These constrictions. Seeds will sprout and thrive, and there aren't enough eyes in the sky to keep all of the American secrets safely their own."

I knew what he said because Claude, remembering his job, hunched down and translated every word.

Then the old man looked at me. One apolitical soul to another, he said, "But you see, Kyle. My friend. This is the problem that I face. These emotions are ragged and unpleasant. And not just with my staff, but with our stockholders too. I wish to do business with you. I believe what you offer is respectable and fair, and I take no offense. But I am not this company, only its servant. I'm sorry that you saw this display today, but at least now you will appreciate my reasons when I tell you no. I will thank you for your time, and on the behalf of everyone, I wish you the best. A safe, uneventful flight back to your homeland, and good day to you."

Like most twelve-year-old boys, my favorite movies usually involved World War II. Battles and tremendous explosions were my passion, and it didn't hurt having brave men not even twice my age doing fearless, selfless acts. New releases were cause for celebration. My father would treat my brothers and me to a matinee, and afterward we'd wrestle our way back to the car, arguing about which scene was best and which soldiers we wanted to be like. Classic films were an excuse to gather around the black-and-white RCA, two wondrous hours spent watching the slaughter of Japs and Krauts. It seemed like such good fun, even when I was old enough to know that war was a truly awful business.

I had limits, too: I never much liked the atomic bomb movies. The best of that bad lot was the Hiroshima epic, directed by William Wyler, starring Charlton Heston as Paul Tibbets. Despite my love for large explosions, I considered mushroom clouds to be more forces of nature than tools of war. Besides, I wasn't an unthinking monster, and the effects of the blast and radiation were bad enough to stave off any wide-eyed pleasure with that impossibly bright flash of light.

My father was an Alfred Hitchcock fan. With the excuse of an education, he took us to see the classic *Intrigue*. But the movie's charms and subtle power were slow to work their way into my flesh. Espionage was a difficult species of warfare. Dad had to explain quite a lot to his boys, including how the Soviets had placed spies in the heart of the Manhattan Project and how a pair of intelligence officers achieved miracles, rooting out the bastards before any damage could be done.

"If those heroes hadn't done their jobs," he warned, "our world would be a very different place today."

"Different how?" I asked.

We were walking back to the car. "Our enemies would have stolen our atomic bomb," he said grimly, emphasizing that stealing element. Political systems aside, his sons were brought up to believe that thieves were cowards and worse. "And without our spy-busters working in the shadows, the Communists would have gotten the hydrogen bomb too."

"What's the difference?" my youngest brother asked. "Between atomic . . . and what's the word. . . ?"

"Hydrogen," I told him, using my smart, twelve-year-old voice. "Hydrogen bombs are much, much worse."

"They're just bigger," Dad corrected. "A weapon isn't good or bad. It just is. What makes it evil is how it is used."

"Have we ever used H-bombs?" asked my other brother.

"Three times," Dad allowed. "Only three times. And they hopefully won't be needed again."

"But we have them," I added confidently.

"And we keep them at the ready," he allowed. "Warheads on missiles, bombs in bombers, and there's always at least one nuclear submarine hiding in the ocean, ready to fire its payload on a moment's notice."

This was all good and reasonable, in other words. And with that, we let the topic drop, getting back to the important business of wrestling our way to the car.

When I was in college, *The Good Hand* came to one theatre. I knew nothing about the little film, except that it was set in some bizarre future New York City. My girlfriend had read a favorable review and we went together, but she wasn't a very strong person. The filth and disease and easy deaths of that first half hour proved too much. Leaning close, she demanded that we leave. And since I was hoping for sex, either that night or in my own near future, I did the gracious thing.

The title, *The Good Hand*, remained a small mystery. It wasn't until eight or nine years later, living in a large city with an art house movie theatre, I finally watched that violent nightmare to its conclusion. The director, Martin Scorsese, did very little work after *The Good Hand*, and it was easy to see why. His hypothetical world was brutal and suffocating. Powerful, faceless entities controlled every aspect of knowledge. Books were kept under lock and key, even the least sensitive titles subject to layers upon layers of restrictions and bureaucratic hoops.

The story was preposterous, yet after the first frames, utterly believable. The protagonist was a young fellow who wanted nothing but to make a better spaghetti sauce. That's all. The twentieth century was famous for its delicious sauces, and wanting to know more about tomatoes and basil and garlic and sausage, he filled out the appropriate forms. But one box on the backside of one page was checked when he should have left it empty, and his request was dropped into a much more dangerous pile of forms.

At that point, a brutal comedy took flight. One tiny misunderstanding caused people to die, while others barely survived. The young chef lost friends and family, and he had to kill two strangers and avoid a fast-moving car before the pursuing intelligence officer finally caught him.

"This is a sad, essential business," the officer explained to his prisoner. "If a citizen believes he can reach for any title, to slake any intellectual thirst, how do we keep our grip on society?"

"Why do we need any grip?" the bloodied but valiant hero responded. "Can't people do what they want? Can't they learn what they want . . . just so long as it doesn't hurt anyone. . . ?"

Played by a young De Niro, the intelligence officer was an intoxicating mixture of acid and charm. He laughed for a few moments. Then with grave certainty, he said, "You don't know the dangers waiting in these old texts. And I don't know much about them either. But I'm one tough bastard, and what I do know scares me. The bombs and poisons that you could make up in your kitchen . . . well, I'd do anything to protect my world from those horrors. And every time I meet someone naïve, someone like you, it reminds me. Inside each of us, there's a fatal flaw. We suffer from a crazy urge that keeps us chasing every bit of knowledge, including nightmares that can doom our species and our world."

The young Al Pacino played the would-be cook. "Are you crazy? This is about spaghetti sauce," he screamed. "That's all I want to know!"

"Not according to these forms," his opponent countered.

"I made a mistake," Pacino swore, and not for the first time.

"No," his nemesis replied. "You used the system against us. You put your mark in that box to allow your nose where it didn't belong. Your plan was clever, and you had this ingenious excuse waiting. In case an official more gullible than me happened to grab your case."

"You aren't listening to me," the prisoner complained.

"I've heard every word," the interrogator promised. "And now what you need to do is pay attention when I tell you this: The past is forbidden. There are things that can't be revealed. Certainly not to the likes of you."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I'm not worthy, either," the officer replied, laughing aside even the suggestion of special treatment. Then from a shelf where important tools were kept, he pulled down a steel cleaver of obvious heft and sharpness. "Regardless what you think, I'm not a monster. I have mercy, and I genuinely want to let you off with a warning. So tell me now. Be honest. Which one is your good hand?"

"My what?"

"Which hand do you cook with?"

The hero was right-handed—a point made several times in the narrative. But he was a clever sort, having the presence of mind to lift his left hand as far as the shackles allowed.

"Very well," said the officer, smiling with a professional coolness. Then he turned to two nameless fellows waiting in the shadows. "Hold the right wrist," he instructed. "Hold it very tight now."

As the cleaver rose, the hero shouted, "Not that hand, no!"

"Then you should have answered differently," was the response. And at least one member of the audience—an apolitical sort on his best day—grimaced and curled up tight, fending off the blows that came only in his imagination.

Following the Great Lunch Disaster, I retreated to my room and called home, leaving a very sorry report on the office answering machine. I was exhausted, and with an evening event with another French firm scheduled, I stripped and collapsed under the covers, drifting into a wonderful, dreamless sleep.

Noises woke me.

First came the precise knocking on wood, and then a loud, uncomfortable voice saying my name.

Sitting up, I assumed I was late for my appointment. Clumsy apologies preceded the realization that Claude wasn't speaking. In fact, it was a woman's voice. I coughed, muttered, "Just a minute," and managed to put one leg into my pants before finding enough curiosity to ask the obvious question:

"Who is it?"

"Noelene."

"Oh." Why did I know that name? My mind saw the woman at lunch, but that seemed unlikely. My memory was playing games with me. "Just a moment," I begged, fastening my pants and buttoning my shirt halfway before realizing that I hadn't lined up the buttons and holes properly. Fine. I reached for the door regardless, and that was when another possibility occurred to me. Noelene was a sweet voice standing in the hallway, flanked by a pair of French thugs, the three of them ready to rob the vulnerable American.

No peephole had been bored into the heavy old door. I left the chain attached, and with my foot serving as a second line of defense, I looked through the tiniest gap.

My first instinct had been right. Except for her smile, the woman from lunch looked perfectly miserable. "It is bad," she announced.

"What is?"

"You don't know?"

"I don't." Nodding at my bed, I admitted, "I have jet lag."

"You bombed us."

Startled, I stepped back.

The woman stared at the chain and then at me. Her smile had become something else. The anger was perfectly reasonable, but there was compassion as well. She put her arms around her waist, sighing deeply before saying, "We could be at war."

"No," I managed. "Not war."

Quietly, almost tenderly, she said, "Kyle. Please let me inside."

I shut the door and unfastened the chain and opened it again. Then I turned on the television, preprogrammed to find the hotel's most useless channel—classical music playing while a slide show proved what a fine city Nancy was. Where was the BBC? I punched buttons, absorbing repeated images of the same fire and smoke. The other networks were full of the news, but at least the British voices could explain what I was seeing.

"Algeria?" I managed. "What's in Algeria?"

"Our space program," she claimed.

"You have one?" I blurted, using an unfortunate tone.

Noelene grimaced. But for a minute or two she said nothing, allowing me to gain some appreciation for what had happened in the middle of the North African desert. Rockets and the assembly buildings, fuel tanks and even the railroad lines leading south from Algiers had been obliterated. Smart-bombs and small teams of commandoes had done the brutal work. Casualties were less than fifty, although those numbers were preliminary. Then that wise BBC voice explained that a wing of long-range Skyangers was fueling in Missouri, preparing to strike the uranium enrichment facility outside Grenoble.

"Why are we admitting that?" I asked the television.

"Because you like us so much," Noelene replied, sarcasm riding on her voice. "We are your friends. Your allies, on occasion. You're giving us time to move our civilians out of harm's way." That's how we did things in Israel: A stern warning followed less than a day later with a burrowing bomb, famous for its cleanliness but still throwing a horrible mess across the Negev.

Not knowing what to say, I whispered, "All right."

She looked at my chest.

Yes, my buttons. I undid them and began again, and when success was near, I thought to ask, "But why are you here?"

She didn't seem to notice the question.

"You don't like me," I continued. "And you hate my country."

She looked at my eyes and said, "Kyle."

It's silly, I know. But I liked the way my name sounded coming out of her wide, lovely mouth.

"I don't know you," Noelene began. "And I don't hate your country. But I know America enough to despise its government's policies."

"But why are you here?"

"This is my supervisor's idea," she explained. "When this news broke, he mentioned that he was worried about you. He turned to me and explained that he couldn't get involved—his station and responsibilities wouldn't allow it—but he thought that I might take pity on you. You need help. Yes? Before events swallow up all of our lives?"

I settled on the corner of my bed.

She considered the nearby chair. But sitting wasn't her intention. "Your passport."

"What about it?"

"You'll need it and any essential belongings."

I was confused.

"But leave your suitcase, and please don't bother checking out of the hotel. My car is close. We can reach the highway before 17:00."

"When?"



"Five o'clock."

It was that late. I stared at my watch, trying to decide what to take. If I was actually leaving, that is.

"Kyle?"

"Are we going back to Paris?"

"God, no." The ignorance of an average American amazed Noelene. "You have to leave this country as soon as possible. Germany isn't far, if we start right now. . .!"

Every face in the world suddenly seemed important. Every glance from a stranger carried menace: Do they know who I am? Do they want revenge? The average pedestrian looked tense, distracted and angry. Two old men stood on a street corner, rigid fingers accusing the sky of something or another, and though I couldn't understand them, I had no doubt that Algeria was the topic. A gentleman in a suit and tie leaned against a stone building, listening to the static and news on a small transistor radio. A young woman walking toward us suddenly looked at me, and a smile flickered before vanishing into an expression more grim than seemed possible on such a pretty face. Then as we passed each other, she whispered a few words to Noelene.

Noelene replied with a phrase, nothing more.

"Did you know her?" I asked.

"No." She fished a single car key from her purse. "I don't. How would I?"

"It just seemed—" I began.

"Here," she interrupted, steering me to a vehicle even tinier than Claude's Renault. But remarkably, it was a Ford. A model not sold in America, but an unexpected harbinger of home. I took this as a good sign. Crawling into the passenger seat, I thanked Noelene for her unexpected help. She nodded and looked at the steering wheel, saying nothing. Then remembering the key in her hand, she started the little motor and took the wheel with both hands before facing me. "I'm doing what I was told to do," she stated.

"You've explained that. But thank you anyway."

Pushing the car into gear, she said, "I should warn you. My driving is rather spectacular."

"What is that?" I said above the revving. I assumed that "spectacular" was the wrong word.

But it wasn't.

Minutes later, I was wearing my seat belt and shoulder harness and my door was locked, both hands wrapped around the plastic handle above the window. As promised, we were flying down the highway. It seemed as if we were on the same road on which I had entered Nancy. Noelene admitted that it was, then added, "But not for long." Several quick turns followed, and I lost all track of where I was. Maybe we were heading for Germany, but why was the sun on my right? Didn't we want the sun setting behind us? I asked myself that reasonable question, more than once, and she must have heard my thoughts because without prompting, she volunteered, "We will be turning in another few kilometers. Don't worry."

I had so much to worry about, I let that topic drop.

"Do you mind?" she asked, reaching between us.

"What?" I sputtered.

"The radio. May I listen to the news?"

"Of course. Yes."

A professional newscaster was talking. The man's level, almost soothing voice might have been discussing stock prices or the weather. But then he vanished, replaced by the taped comments of some government official. Or so I guessed: Government voices have that gait, that self-importance, making pronouncements meant to represent millions but mattering only to their inflated egos.

We kept driving south.

One important turnoff was marked with what for the French was a large sign, and I was quite sure that the arrow was pointing toward the United German States. But then we were past it, and looking back, I had to ask, "Why?"

Noelene glanced at me longer than she should have. At the speeds we were driving, I wanted her eyes forward. "Do you understand anything?" she asked.

What we were talking about?

"French," she explained.

"Merci.' Maybe a few other—"

"The borders have been closed, Kyle."

My grip on the handle couldn't be any tighter, but that wasn't for lack of trying. "What borders? With Germany?"

"As a precaution, yes."

I didn't know what to say.

"But I have a friend," she continued. "A customs agent, and I think he'll help us."

I don't like messes. I never have. And that seemed like the worst part of this nightmare—its considerable untidiness.

"He works in," she began, naming a town I didn't know.

"And he'll let me across?"

She said, "Yes."

Then a little softer, "I think so."

Maybe this was best. Maybe everything would work out, and I could climb on a nice German plane and head home. But even as I sat back in the hard little seat—as the sun finished setting and the French scenery raced past with a succession of blurring, increasingly dark grays—I thought to look at the single key in the car's ignition. What kind of person keeps her key on its own ring?

"Is this car yours?"

Noelene gave my abrupt question a little too much thought. Then looking straight ahead, she said, "Yes." She used the word that one time, just to practice the lie. Then again, with more authority, she told me, "Yes," and glanced my way, showing an unconvincing smile.

We drove fast and far, and I applied myself to learning everything possible about this strange automobile. The speedometer had us scorching along at better than 150 KPH, riding on nothing but four doughnut-sized tires. Our gas tank wasn't full when we began, and by the time I began paying attention, the gauge read half-empty. Despite the darkness, I tried to spot landmarks and keep track of our turns. But I've never been much of a navigator. Finally, summoning a measure of courage, I asked, "Do you have a road map?"

She seemed ready for my request. "Look in the glove box, Kyle."

I was already opening it, to find nothing but the car manual and several receipts that I couldn't read in the dark.

I said nothing, contemplating my situation.

She imagined questions and picked one to answer.

"This won't last much longer, Kyle."

"Pardon?"

"The world situation. American power." Something about this was funny. I didn't expect her to laugh, but that's what she did: A soft, girlish giggle followed by the apology, "I don't mean that your country will be destroyed. Nobody wants that. But you know, this power you have over the rest of us . . . it's fragile. It's doomed. That's what I meant to say."

I nodded seriously, as if politics were forefront in my mind. Then over the hum of

the highway, I asked what seemed like a perfectly reasonable question. "How would that help anything?"

She said nothing. In a particular way, she held her silence.

"I don't understand," I admitted. "The world is prosperous and at peace. Why would you want to upset the order of things?"

Noelene leaned close to the steering wheel, as if willing herself to reach our destination sooner.

"What kind of world would this be?" I asked. "All right, France acquires the bomb. Then the Israelis and Egyptians, the Soviets and Chinese. Britain and Germany would have to build suitable armories. And I suppose even Canada would want two or three little nukes, just to earn their southern neighbor's respect." I had found my rhythm, listing progressively smaller nations. French sensibilities were triggered when I mentioned, "Switzerland."

"Why?" she interrupted. "Why would the Swiss need such things?"

I watched her and watched the dashboard. The red silhouette of a gasoline tank warned that we were nearly out of fuel.

Noelene risked a quick glance my way. Then with eyes fixed on the blurring road, she stated, "Neutral powers wouldn't bother."

"Well," I pointed out. "Perhaps they wouldn't see things quite as you do."

She said nothing.

And I kept my own silence, realizing just how sick of worry I was. This deep dread of mine began before I boarded the plane in Chicago, and every step of my journey had made it heavier and more acidic.

"You never should have done it," she began.

"What's that?"

"The nuclear monopoly . . . you should never have claimed it. Never. If you had shared your nuclear plans, the genuine powers would have each built only what we needed. France would have a few bombs, and the Soviets, and everyone. Our borders would be protected. There wouldn't be any reason for war. Why would one nation fight another if it meant that their capital would burn, their population enduring catastrophic losses?"

"Is that how things would be?"

"Oh yes," she exclaimed. "Peace. Real peace. And some world court that would judge the nations, identifying what was wrong and making settlements between competitors. This is obvious . . . so obvious . . . I cannot believe anyone would think otherwise."

"Yet I do," I admitted.

She grimaced. "You can't hold this power forever."

I was terrified and extraordinarily tired, yet at the same moment my mind was sharp. Pushing my face close to her ear, I asked, "And how will you stop us, Noelene?"

She gave a start, the swift little car wandering out of its lane. Then she straightened her back and our trajectory, eyes straight ahead, bright with tears. "You aren't monsters," she informed me.

"I know I'm not."

"When you realize . . . when your country understands how many innocent civilians you'll have to murder to maintain your hegemony . . . well, you'll stop yourselves. Your president will have no choice but to recall those bombers. Yes? I know this. You're not psychopaths, and your conscience won't let you slaughter thousands of peaceful demonstrators."

"Thousands?" I blurted.

She fell silent.

Leaning against my door, I asked, "Where are you taking me, Noelene?"

One hand came off the steering wheel, fingertips wiping at her eyes as the car drifted out of its lane again. "To the border. I told you."

There was little heart left in her lie.

For the next sixteen minutes, we rode in total silence. I asked myself how close we were to Grenoble and how slow we would have to be going for me to open my door and roll onto the pavement. Better that than get involved in some bizarre self-imposed hostage situation, surely. Then came the mechanical clicking of a turn signal, and Noelene was braking while pulling off the highway. A pool of fluorescent green light beckoned, gas pumps and cheery French signs and a very welcome Coke symbol hung in the bright station window. "I thought we had enough fuel," she muttered, perhaps speaking to herself.

She sounded as worried as I felt.

"I'll make this quick," she promised, throwing a weak smile at her increasingly wily captive.

I opened my door as soon as the car stopped. My mind was made up. Better to take my chances with strangers, I reasoned, than remain at the mercy of this misguided woman. I assumed that Noelene would try to stop me. She'd offer more lies or perhaps threaten me. What I didn't expect was no reaction past a vague, "Where are you going?"

"The bathroom," I lied.

But before I managed two steps, someone shouted her name. People were standing at the edge of the light, a large group gathered around what looked like a parked school bus. Noelene climbed out of the borrowed car and looked at them, and the worries on her face fell away. She called out several names, waving enthusiastically. Several young men came running, examining me while passing and then gathering around their good friend, talking with quiet intense voices. I kept walking. One by one, the men glanced at me, nodding happily. Stepping into the service station, I realized that I had to pee in the most urgent, desperate way. The bathroom was a small, extraordinarily clean room with one toilet and a lock. There had to be a back door out of the station. But first, I did what couldn't wait, and then as the toilet ran, I splashed water on my face and dried my hands, wondering which way was east, and what were the odds of a terrified, language-impaired American making his own way across the German border.

But the challenge wouldn't be met. Two substantial men were waiting outside the bathroom door. Waiting for me, judging by the hands that grabbed my shoulders and elbows. I felt tiny. I felt carried, although my feet remained on the floor with every step. A sour looking woman behind the counter glared at me, and the largest man said, "Your passport. It is with you?"

For no good reason but to be difficult, I said, "No."

Noelene was waiting for us outside. The big man asked her a question, and visibly surprised, she said, "He brought it with him, yes."

"I threw it out the window," I lied. "Miles and miles ago."

"You did what?" Strangely, that angered her. She sneered and gave a few quick instructions in French, and a hand almost too big to fit inside my right front pocket snatched up the prize. Then it was handed to her, and she slipped it inside her pocket, saying, "I'll keep this safe for you, Kyle."

"No," I muttered.

"We ride in the bus together," the big man said, giving me a bone-rattling pat on the back.

Again, I said, "No."

"We insist."

I decided to collapse on the pavement. But that did nothing but strip away the last of my dignity. The men grabbed my arms and legs and carried me to the bus and up into the darkness. I smelled smoke and liquor and competing perfumes. Who wears perfume to a mass suicide? I begged to be put down, and I agreed to stand on my own, but my captors insisted on shoving me into one of the front seats, next to a small figure that looked female and was wearing some kind of uniform.

I didn't recognize the woman. Honestly, I hadn't looked twice at the face riding beside me in the airliner. But the black and orange-trimmed uniform was the same, and she had the same build and similar short hair. Someone or something had struck her face, probably more than once, and someone else had given her a white towel to press against what looked like a very ugly cut beside her left eye.

I looked at the bus door, ready to run.

But the big Frenchman read my mind. Standing in the aisle, he grinned down at me, explaining, "We wait for the rest. As soon as they come, we leave. Very soon now."

My earlier terrors were nothing compared to this. Anxieties were piled high. I breathed hard, moaned and shook. My hope of hopes was to panic—a full-blown craziness born from adrenaline and nothing left to loose. I would beg. I would lie. Any excuse was viable, aiming for whatever was most pathetic. I was even sorry that I had emptied my bladder, since I doubted anyone here would appreciate riding to the Alps with a urine-soaked coward.

Through the bus windows, I saw Noelene move her car away from the pumps, parking somewhere behind the bus.

Another little car arrived, pulling up ahead, out of view. But I barely noticed. Watching my hands tremble, I wished I could call home, just once, and tell my news to whoever picked up the receiver.

Through the open windows, a voice found me.

I recognized its timbre, its smoothness. Leaping to my feet, I saw a familiar face talking to the big man and Noelene.

I started to shout, "Claude," but someone behind me decided to shove me, dropping me to the rubberized floor.

Shifting in our seat, the rad-hunter looked down at me. The gore and shadows made her look especially defiant. Plainly, I wasn't doing a very good job of defending my nation's honor.

Claude spoke with the others for several minutes, arguing and explaining before stopping, allowing an increasing number of participants to take their turn. I returned to my seat, listening to every sound. Once again my translator repeated his points, making sure that he was understood. There was gravity to his tone, plus a little despair. Suddenly the rad-hunter pulled away the towel, taking a deep breath before telling me, "They're letting you go."

"What?"

"Your friend just saved you," she explained, staring at me with a vivid, hateful envy.

The big man came into the bus and waved at me.

With shoulders bowed, I went to him. I would have kissed him on the hands and cheeks, I was that happy. Then I was led outside, and Claude watched me until I looked at him. Then he turned to Noelene, offering a few words intended only for her.

"I didn't know," she said to me.

The woman was weeping. Because of me or because of her emotions getting the best of her—I couldn't tell which.

I started to talk, but Claude interrupted. "You have your passport? You will need it."

Where was my soul? I stupidly patted my pockets before remembering that it was stolen a few minutes ago.

I looked at weepy Noelene.

"He must have it," Claude warned.

She seemed more willing to surrender me than the document. But she placed it in my hands, and for a long moment, I did nothing. I was waiting for an apology. But none was offered. Once again, she claimed, "I didn't know," and she turned and walked away toward the bus.

"Don't go," I blurted.

Startled, she looked back at me.

"Go there, and you will die," I said with all of the authority I could muster. "It'll be like Israel, a burrowing nuke. It'll make a huge mess, and you'll get poisoned and die in some slow awful way."

That fate had its terrors, but she refused to cower. Braver than I would ever be, Noelene said, "Your people won't let this happen. How could they? We're allies. We helped your country win its freedom." She made a bomber with one hand, and smiling, pulled it back toward the sky. "Your president will see us, and in the end, he will give in."

As fast as the journey south had been, the return trip was even faster. The tiny Renault rattled and shook, and its driver focused his attentions on the road, barely finding the breath, much less the need, to explain that he had traded in several favors and paid some undisclosed bribe to less forgiving souls, and that's before he had told Noelene that my only child was back in the States, in the Mayo Clinic, dying of cancer.

"That's why she's sorry," I muttered.

"A little lie," he confessed.

Watching the same road, I said, "Thank you."

Which made him angrier, it seemed. We were heading toward Paris and some final flight home, though he wasn't promising that we would make it in time.

"How did you know where I was?"

He didn't answer.

Again, I told him, "Thank you."

Maybe he nodded. I watched but I wasn't sure.

The car radio was turned up high. It was the middle of the night, but the voices were animated and steady, senselessly describing events of great importance. I found myself thinking about the rad-hunter and what would happen to her and Noelene. Mostly Noelene.

"I knew where you would be," said Claude, glancing at me.

"You're involved with them," I guessed.

"Since the beginning," he allowed. "Yes." He sighed and a few moments later admitted, "But I'm glad you're here. You are my excuse. Really, I don't want to die tonight."

"That's funny," I muttered.

He looked at me, insulted.

"I don't mean funny," I apologized. "I meant to say odd. It's odd because . . . this sounds silly, I know . . . but some part of me wants to be with them now. You know? All those brave noble people doing what they think must be right. I don't want to be there, and I don't want to be a hostage, no. But there's two women that I keep thinking about. Isn't that crazy?"

"It is human nature," my savior said, shaking his head wearily.

The sun was beginning to show itself. Looking east, I began to mention the first flush of dawn. But then the radio gave a harsh sputtering roar before the station fell silent. We listened to the static, and then Claude turned off the radio, and we listened to the road and our own thoughts. Really, at that point, what else could be said? ○

# WILDS

Carol Emshwiller

Ursula K. Le Guin has called Carol Emshwiller a “major fabulist,” and the truth of that compliment is eminently clear in her subtle new tale for *Asimov's*. Carol's next book, a collection of her most recent short stories with a cover by her late husband, Ed Emshwiller, will be coming out in England from PS Publishing.

The first night in the wild I find a cave in among a pile of fallen rocks. It's so small I have to crawl in backward so as to be facing the right direction in order to get out. It was fine for that one night. I actually sleep a bit. But it's in a low place. If it had rained I'd have gotten wet. Something small had lived there and hadn't been careful not to foul its nest. I don't smell that good now myself, though I don't expect I'll meet anybody.

But I want a higher place—for lots of reasons. I'd like a view of the valley below. I start climbing. Several times I see berries. At first I don't dare eat any. Then I try them. If they taste good, I keep eating.

I have to climb, up and down and up and down, all day and most of the next to find a place I like. When I find it I don't have time to look for shelter. I sleep where I fall. At least I'm high up and a hard climb away from everybody and everything.

In the morning, not far from where I lie, I find an overhanging rock for shelter. I start making a wall around it. Then I go back down to the tree line to find more berries and nibble on greens. I catch a fish by hand and eat it raw. I climb back to my mountain to sleep. There's not much up there but boulders and on every side but one there's riprap. Hard for anyone to climb up to me, on one side the scary cliff, on the other those unstable shoebox size rocks.

The next day I start on a tower. I already have a pretty good view if I stand on my sheltering rock, but I want an even better one. The view is spectacular. Far below there's a red cinder cone, lower, a marshy green lake, across the valley, more mountains where there's always odd cloud formations.

I'm not ever going to finish my tower. I want to go on and on with it for the pure pleasure of moving stones. Already in just these few days, I'm stronger than I ever was. My arms hardly look like my arms. I have a start on a beard.

When my tower is about five feet above my sheltering rock, I stop, go lower down to a marshy pond and gather a reed and make a flute. It only has four holes, but that's enough notes for me.

Every morning I climb my tower and study the hills and valleys. Then I start my day: Moving rocks, playing the flute, and then I go down below the tree line to eat and drink.

But one morning, I see somebody climbing up toward me. I hope he's just testing himself, climbing as high as he can, getting cold and worn out, teetering on the riprap, and then going right back down. I already tested myself in those ways. I understand the need.

I look around to make sure nothing of my living here shows. My tower could be a



natural formation. I deliberately made it to look that way. I'm not worried it might be discovered.

Then, as the person nears, I hide.

I've always hidden. First from Mother and Dad and from my three older brothers. Hiding was my way of life from the beginning.

I ducked and slunk along. I hunched over. I never looked people in the eye. I grew large, but I wanted to be small. Though I finally grew even larger than my big brothers, I never dared to challenge them.

And then . . . suddenly . . . *suddenly* . . . I found the wilds. First I stepped slowly, wondering at it, marveling, and then I ran. Straight into it vowing never to leave. I shouted, I jumped from rock to rock, hid from tree to tree, walked the, then, empty trails. I began to sing. (I never had before.) I kept time by tapping a stick against my knee.

I couldn't bear to leave—even to go back for supplies. I don't have a pan or a flashlight or a knife. I left the car by the side of the road. A rented car. I had said to myself, I'll just take a little walk. I saw rocks with bright orange lichen and trees, all leaning to the left, and a cliff with a stony path zigzagging up it. I wondered what it would be like to be in among all that.

Now I take only what the wilds gives me. It feeds me and teaches me. I trained myself to eat what it gives, insects and snakes. Tiny eggs. When you want to live here, you have to learn new ways.

The first I ever ate insects was because my brothers forced me to. Raw goldfish, too. I was afraid I'd get sick so I researched what might be poison. Now I live on bugs and raw fish and worse things than they could even think of. Mouse or rat-like creatures. Slugs.

I have to go down my mountain to get those bugs and snakes. Also berries and roots. Down there is where I set my traps.

But even as I swallow little snakes, I'm singing.

But here's this person climbing my mountain. I can't imagine someone being here except to test themselves as I used to do.

I have plenty of stones for weapons. Except I've never fought in my life.

He stumbles up the last riprap, and does just as I did when I first got here, collapses on the rocks. That can't be comfortable. He's so worn out he wouldn't have noticed me if I'd been standing right in front of him.

I dare to come closer. I hold a rock. I peer down at . . . Him? Her? What's she doing way out here all by herself?

I put down the rock. Being rid of her would be the safest for keeping my place and me a secret—bang her head with a rock and toss her off the steep side. It would look like a bad fall.

She's small and thin. There's a blondish ponytail coming out from under her red cap, there's red nail polish on her dirty broken nails, she's wearing the wrong shoes for climbing. Besides her canvas pack, she has a small red purse sideways across her shoulder.

Her pack looks stuffed. Usually people have pans and canteens and a lot of dried food. I'm hoping for things like that. I quietly, carefully, unbuckle the pack. Odd, It's not an ordinary backpack, but more like a mailman's bag.

Out comes money. A lot. Packages of hundred dollar bills.

I'm not being careful anymore. I'm looking for something I can use . . . anything at all. I shout with frustration and scrabble in the bag. The money is in packets. Some come apart. It's always windy up here. Some blow away in packets and some blow away as single bills.

She hears me yell. Jumps up and grabs at the bills. Gets a couple. Then turns and tries to close the pack on what's left.

There's not one thing in there that's of any use to me. I'd even settle for toilet paper.

It's good I don't have the rock anymore. What I do is slap her. So hard that she's flat out on the rocks.

When have I ever slapped anybody? At once I say I'm sorry but I'm really not. She doesn't let me help her up and I don't blame her. Who knows what I'm going to do next.

"Is this all you brought?"

"It was almost fifty thousand."

"No food?"

She starts counting up the money that's still left in the sack. She shields it from the wind with her body and tries to keep everything deep inside the bag as she counts. Says, "Oh no, oh no," over and over.

"No food?"

"Oh no. Only a couple of thousand left."

She rests her head on the money bag and takes deep breaths. If she had the energy she'd be crying. Or maybe attacking me. Then says, "Can I have a drink of water?"

"You'll have to go back down for it."

"I'm so worn out. Could you get me some?"

"I don't have anything to carry water in. I have to go down to drink, too. I was hoping you'd have a canteen or at least a cup."

She lies back, hugging the money pack.

We're silent.

She looks too delicate to be out here. I do like her looks. And that makes me think how I'm a hulk. I'm nice and thin now, but still a lumpy man. I'm suddenly conscious, as I used to be when out with people, of my big hands and feet, my hairy arms, my bony face. I've been called a big dumb lug and not just by my brothers.

"Is that cap waterproof? I could get you a little bit in that."

"I don't think so."

We're silent again.

Then she asks, "Do you have any food?"

"Nothing to carry that in either. I suppose I could bring something up for you." I don't say, Maybe a little snake you can choke down whole. Maybe a pocketful of bugs.

I do want to shock her though. I want her to realize money isn't worth much out here. Maybe good for tinder. I haven't been building fires, though if I catch a fish, I suppose she'll want it cooked.

"When you're feeling rested I'll help you down. Maybe catch you a fish. I don't suppose you have any matches."

"No." So faint I can hardly hear it.

We're quiet again. Then she says, "I haven't had anything to eat for two days. I'll give you a hundred dollars if you get me something."

I laugh.

"Two hundred? Three?"

"I'd do it for a knife or a pan."

But I take pity on her. "Soon as you're rested, we'll go down."

First she takes pains to hide the money. There's only one good place: my overhang. She puts it way in the back and covers it with sand and scree. She doesn't notice my flute. It doesn't look like much more than a dry stick.

It's a hard climb down, but just the first part. As I'm helping her, we see a couple of hundred dollar bills stuck to the cliff out of the wind. She wants me to get them, but it's too steep. I'm not going to kill myself for money.

Helping her, I'm conscious not only of how unkempt I am. I don't have a comb. I can't imagine what my hair looks like. And my beard. I only have these clothes. I know I must smell though I do wash them now and then. When I do, I tramp around the forest wearing nothing but my shoes, though I am working on hardening up my feet. Then I'll really feel part of the wilds. You can sense a lot through your feet.

I notice her hand next to mine. Her long, slim fingers. . . . No hands could be more different.

Along the steepest ledge, I hold her by the back of her pants. Her hips, her slim waist, her warmth. . . . I haven't been near another person for a long time.

We finally get down into the trees. I take her to my usual spot, beside my stream where it forms a still pool. First she drinks. Then I show her how I catch a fish, bare hands, close to the bank where there's an overhang. I see admiration in her eyes.

I know I'll have to make a fire or she won't eat it. I suppose that old way must work—tinder and a stick on a punkish piece of wood. I wonder how long it takes.

Before I even have the punk and dead grasses all gathered into a pile, she says, "You're a real man of the forest."

I lick my finger and put it down on a big black ant, scoop it up and blatantly eat it.

She flinches. Says, "I guess you are."

Then I confess I've never tried to build a fire until now. "We'll see if I really am," I say. Though, actually, aren't I more a man of the forest if I don't cook my food?

But it does work.

She eats as if she hadn't eaten for days and of course she hasn't. Though it smells good, I let her have it all. Does she even notice that? I make do with skink and one small garter snake. This time I eat them out of her sight and after she's lying back, satisfied.

She says, "I feel much better, but I don't think I can climb back up there tonight. Will you stay with me?" She looks worried—she'd rather not be alone down here. "Though I suppose you're up there because it's safer."

"Less buggy, too."

But I say I'll stay.

She picks a place close to where the fire was. I pick one a discreet distance away. I help her make a bed of ferns. A few minutes after we lie down she says, "Do you think you can help me get some of the money back? You owe it to me. It's your fault it blew away."

I don't want to think about the money. I just grunt.

She's frightened in the middle of the night. I hear her move from the far side of the fire, closer to me.

Down here, not only more bugs, but more noise. Owls hooting or shrieking.

She moves even closer, whispers, "What is that screaming?"

"Just baby screech owls calling to be fed."

Then she gives a little shriek. "Something ran right over me."

"That's how it is down here."

In the morning, right away, she wants to go back up to look for more of the money. Her eyes have dark circles. She's in a bad mood. "We have to," she says. "And it's all your fault the money blew away."

I say, "I'm eating and drinking first."

She says, "I'm not," and takes off.

It isn't as if I could offer her a hot cup of tea before she goes.

I catch a fish and this time cook it for myself. There are still hot coals in the fire ring so it's easy to start it again. I haven't had cooked trout since I got here. It's delicious but I feel ungrateful and disloyal for all the wild has done for me.

I catch up with her when she's almost to the cliff. She's been climbing slowly, looking for money along the way. Her face is dirty and tear-streaked. I'll bet she's thirsty now.

She says, "I found a packet of hundreds, and a couple of single bills, but that's all." I say I'll help.

"You owe me thirty or forty thousand dollars."

I can't help but laugh again. "Good luck," I say. "But I will help."

She stops to rest and I go off looking for more money. I find three more packs. Not without taking risks. I keep wondering, is a pack of hundred dollar bills worth a bad fall?

I come back for her to help her up the last steep cliff. At the top, she gets her pack, puts in what we found, and starts counting, while I climb down the other side to see what I can find over there. The loose bills are as if alive, waiting till I'm almost up to them and then blowing away, but I do get some.

It's late and I'm hungry. She must be even more so, what with rushing off with no breakfast.

She keeps saying, "This won't do," and, "It was hardly worth it."

I'm still angry that she brought nothing but money, but I'm trying to be nice. "Come on, we'll go down and eat."

I didn't want to yearn for anything of that old life but now I do in spite of myself. Mostly for the foods. Is the rental car still on that side road waiting? But then I'm thinking: If I could bring down a deer. . . . Then use the skin for a carrying case. But I wanted the freedom of *not* doing all those things. I wanted to be naked. I wanted to be an animal.

"Can we stay down there again tonight?"

She's meek now. I suppose she's beginning to realize where she's landed. And it sounds as if she looks up to me, but that's because I'm the only person she can rely on for help. Or is it because I'm risking my neck climbing around looking for the money?

"We'll stay down there all day tomorrow. We'll make a basket and bring up fish, and maybe find a way to carry water." I don't dare say, Let's use your money bag for carrying fish.

What am I doing? I don't even know her name and I'm not sure I want to.

Even though I've been out here hardly a month . . . (I'm guessing. I haven't kept track. And, actually, I want to be done with time.) . . . I've gotten used to being alone. I was happy with my view and my four note flute. I particularly don't want somebody around who stole money and is hiding out with maybe police following her. Maybe I should just go find another mountain top that isn't afloat in hundred dollar bills. But, "Come on," I say. "You must be hungry."

We round the cliff to the scary ledge. I grab the back of her pants again but I don't look this time. Still, I feel her bare skin. I feel her warmth.

On the way down I see a few more single bills but I don't mention them. I don't know if she sees them, too, but she doesn't say anything either.

We get back to the clearing by the stream. We sit and rest there a few minutes. The jay is squawking. The stream is bubbling along. She says, "It's nice here."

I'm thinking, Damn right, and it was even better before you came.

Then we get to work.

She knows enough to pick willow branches along the stream. I give up and do the fishing and fire-making. I have a little rat-like creature caught in one of my traps—still alive. I don't want her to see it until it's skinned and cut up.

This time we both eat cooked fish and tiny scraps of tough meat. There's extra but how hide it from other hungry creatures? I don't know what the Indians did. I decide to bury it with stones on top of it.

But I'm changing and I don't like it. Am I looking at my view and playing my flute?

With her around I need different things. I know where there's obsidian, I could make myself some knives. Maybe make some arrowheads. I could begin civilization over again from the bottom. Reinvent a hut, an animal-proof storehouse, a bow, find clay. . . . But I don't want any of those.

When we sit down to rest, she hands me a hat. She's woven it in the same way as the basket, but with the leaves left on. A wide, green leafy hat. She's proud of herself. I can see that as she gives it to me. She wants to be thanked. I put it on, but I don't really want it. I don't like what's happening. I came here to live as part of the forest.

On the other hand this hat does look to be part of the forest. It's like wearing a bush. But I'm too angry to thank her.

"So what do you need all this money for?"

She turns away. I think she's starting to cry again.

"And why bring it way out here to a mountain top? Are you expecting to stay until people forget about you? How did you expect to live?"

No answer. Of course no answer.

"Why here? Why *my* mountain? And it would have been nice if you'd brought just one little thing I could use. Just one thing."

She's still turned away.

"Without me you'd already be dead."

She whispers, "I know."

"If you want a car to get away in, I've got one."

Is it still there? Could I find the keys? I tossed them in the roadside bushes first thing in my joy at being away from it and people, and everything civilized. Especially people like she is.

"This isn't what I wanted to do, spend all my days helping you. You're the one owes me. At least an answer."

I slap my hand on the ground so hard I hurt myself. "*Answer!*"

And she does.

"It was just sitting there. I picked it up. I thought it should have been guarded and they deserved to lose it. And then I was thinking: It belongs to the people not the bank. I wasn't going to use it all for me."

"That's not true."

It probably is, but I'm feeling contrary.

"I've never done anything like this before."

"Maybe."

That's most likely true, too.

"That first night in the woods I walked all night. I mean I ran. I must have fallen down a hundred times. I never knew it could be so dark. I was scared. I didn't know what it was like way out here."

"You took it for yourself."

"But I thought they'd catch me right away, so first I bought myself this purse."

She holds up that useless little red purse. She's kept it hanging on her shoulder all this time even as she slept.

"It's a Gucci. I thought maybe they'd think it was mine from before I took the money and would let me keep it. And when they still didn't catch me, I went to eat in a fancy French restaurant. Stuff I'd never had before. Snails and champagne. I thought they'd pick me up any minute. I wanted to get in one really good meal first. They couldn't take that away. But hours went by and when they didn't come I started thinking I could get away with it, so I bought the car."

"You left a car?"

"A red convertible. But I was driving too fast. It went off the road on one of those hairpin curves. I couldn't believe I wasn't hurt. I don't think they'll find it for a while though. It's kind of hidden. I got these shoes, too, but look, they're ruined."

I flop back, squashing my new hat I'm sure, and look up into the trees.

"What do you have in that little purse anyway?"

"Money. But if I'd known I was going to end up here, I'd have bought myself some

boots. I'd have brought you things, too. I'm sorry I didn't. I really, really am." Then she gets all dreamy. "I was going to take my mother out for a French meal, too. I wanted her to have snails. Though I suppose she wouldn't even taste them. I was going to get her a new car. It wasn't all just for me."

I'm thinking of snails and of me eating slugs.

She says, "I wonder if they found the car. I wonder if they even know the money's gone. They were so careless. They deserve not to have it."

I'm still looking straight up the tree trunk. Not how you usually see a tree. Very nice. And I'm dreamy, too. I wish she'd keep quiet. This is all exactly what I ran away from.

I want to ask her, how long is she going to stay and why right here with me? If they're not chasing her why doesn't she go back to where she can have the kind of life she obviously likes? Where little red purses are. . . . But then I wonder if it holds water? Not much, though.

I get up. I need to get away and think. Or maybe play my flute and *not* think.

My feet aren't yet ready to go barefoot, but I take off my shoes anyway, on principle, though I don't know what principle, and walk away. I hope she has enough sense not to come after me. I shed my clothes. That'll keep her away. I find a sheltered spot and sit alone and eat ants for a while. One at a time.

I stay away all night. I miss my mountain top, but I don't go there in case she does. Though I don't know how she'd manage crossing that ledge by herself. Maybe she'll go around to the far side and crawl up the rocks as she did when she first came.

For bugs I cover myself with mud. In the morning I eat roots. I eat raw minnows that I chase into the shallows. Then I make two new flutes, a big one and a little one. Four holes in each. After playing them for a while, I hide them in the crotch of a tree. I'm wonderfully calmed down. Living as I do is soothing.

In the afternoon I head for my mountain. I leave the mud plastered all over me. First I check on our resting place by the stream. But she's gone. There's the hat she made me. I put in on but I leave my shoes there though my feet are in bad shape. Again, it's the principle of the thing. I don't know why.

Mud and big hat like a bush, scraggly beard, naked, bloody feet, limping, lurching . . . I'm enough to scare anybody. Especially a person already scared.

I don't mean to. I'm thinking about my poor feet . . . of my soft sandy bed under the overhang. I'm hoping she won't be there. Though where else would she feel safe at night all by herself?

She screams. Throws up her hands. Then off she goes, backward, over the steep side.

The camping season begins. The place is full of hikers, though not so many this far out. No one comes to my mountain. It's not an important peak and there's no decent path to the top. Nobody likes climbing up unstable piles of shoebox-sized stones.

My feet are hardened by now. I can even leap up the rocks. All I wear is a leafy hat and a little red leather purse across my shoulders. (In it there are hundred dollar bills.) Otherwise I'm dressed in mud. I smell of ferns. I have a flute in the notch of dozens of trees. Some sound high and squeaky and some are low and mysterious—scary in the middle of the night. I see people come out of their tents on moonless nights to listen and wonder.

I could have stolen knives or canteens and ordinary food dozens of times. All summer long, I could live off the campers, but I don't. I don't want anything they have. I'm finished with all that. I do the opposite. I leave hundred dollar bills. I put them in shoes or in a pocket of their packs. If they've left their hats handy, I stuff one or two into their hat bands.

When I lean to drink, as an animal would, I see myself, shaggy and plastered with mud. I look at my reflection and I see exactly who I am. ○

# LOUISA DRIFTING

How can I regard your efforts as sincere  
drifting as you are the other way  
strangely vectoring  
from our breakpart event?

"No, Louisa," you say  
on suit-to-suit,

"look at me spinning uncontrollably  
beyond that whisper of gravitation  
we called our ship,  
another victim of the same  
unavoidable accident."

No, Charles, I say back to you:  
I recognize the erratic wobble  
of your form

growing small though it is,  
barely lit by sunglare  
around this moonlet. I know your walk,  
your talk, your deviations  
from our norm. Now your distance  
has greater physical manifestation:  
an increasing void-distance  
satisfying at least in promising ending—  
your retorting complaints at last  
growing faint and broken  
with the static  
of past acts. Around the other side  
our expended shells may meet again  
in another as you say  
unavoidable  
accident  
and your heart will not quiver then  
either.

—Mark Rich





# THE JEKYLL ISLAND HORROR

Allen M. Steele

Allen Steele's first published story, "Live from the Mars Hotel," appeared in our Mid-December 1989 issue. A regular contributor ever since, he's had two Hugo winners in *Asimov's*—"The Death of Captain Future" (October 1995) and "'... Where Angels Fear to Tread'" (October/November 1997). *Coyote Horizon* is Allen's most recent novel; coming soon is *Coyote Destiny*, the final volume of the Coyote series (*Coyote* and *Coyote Rising*, first appeared in our pages as a long-running series). The author still lives in western Massachusetts with his wife and dogs. He tells us that his latest tale is a true story. Only the facts have been changed.

## Foreword

**T**he following story is not my own but someone else's, one that was passed to me under unusual circumstances.

In March 2008, my wife and I drove to Jekyll Island, Georgia, to attend my niece's wedding. One of the "Golden Isles" on the Atlantic Coast just north of the Florida state line, it's also—among other things—a wildlife sanctuary. My niece is an avid birdwatcher, so she'd been there many times, and for that reason she'd decided to be married in this place. I was looking forward to a family reunion and also a break from the last days of a hard New England winter, but anticipated nothing else.

Because the bridegroom wanted to have a traditional Jewish wedding, the ceremony was scheduled to begin at sundown Saturday evening. That gave my wife and me plenty of time to wander around. I'd visited Jekyll Island several years earlier, when I was a guest author at a science fiction convention held at one of the island's seaside resort hotels, and thus was already familiar with the place and its history. Linda had never been there before, though, so we spent the morning exploring the historic district on the mainland side, where the State of Georgia had preserved the "cottages"—small mansions, really—built at the turn of the last century by the millionaires who'd once claimed the island as their winter retreat.

These second homes lay inside a fenced-in compound that surrounded the sprawling manse of the Jekyll Island Club. In its heyday, the Jekyll Island Club had been

one of the most exclusive in America, its roster limited to one hundred members and including such notables as John Pierpoint Morgan, William Rockefeller, Marshall Field, Joseph Pulitzer, William Vanderbilt, and Cyrus McCormick, Jr. Their cottages, usually echoing the Victorian architecture of the clubhouse but sometimes also modeled after Swiss chateaux and Spanish haciendas, line the white gravel footpaths that wind through the surrounding pine groves. The club had its own indoor and outdoor tennis courts, swimming pool, eighteen-hole golf course, and other luxuries, and the compound's isolation was assured by the lack of permanent residences elsewhere on the island. Most of Jekyll Island was uninhabited when it had been the preserve of the wealthy and powerful, and because the first bridge to the mainland wasn't built until the mid-twentieth century, the only way to get there was aboard a small private steamer from Brunswick, where the winter residents would arrive by train at the beginning of the season.

After walking around the compound for a while, Linda and I paid a visit to the island's only bookstore, located in what had once been the club's private infirmary. As usual, I checked to see if any of my novels were there, and was pleasantly surprised to find a couple of them on the shelves. Since I'm in the habit of signing my books when I'm on the road, I took them to the front counter, where I introduced myself to the proprietor.

This turned out to be a gentleman in his late sixties, George Hess. He was only too happy to let a visiting author autograph his books, and as I did so, Mr. Hess and I got to talking. He told me that he'd been born and raised on the island, and that his late father—who'd also written a few SF stories himself, during the pulp era—had once been the valet of a New York magazine publisher who'd joined the Jekyll Island Club in the early 1930s. His father remained on Jekyll Island after the club closed down during World War II, where he married a former servant who'd once worked at the club.

Our conversation then took an interesting turn. Mr. Hess asked if I thought there was intelligent life beyond Earth. As a science fiction writer, this is a question I've heard more times than I like to remember; suppressing a sigh, I responded that, yes, I considered this to be a very strong possibility, and indeed would be surprised if there were no other races inhabiting our galaxy. But when he asked if I thought aliens had ever visited Earth, I shook my head. No, I replied, I rather doubt that; UFOs are little more than modern myths, if not outright hoaxes, and theories of so-called "ancient astronauts" are usually misinterpretations of legends and archeological artifacts. In any case, there is no indisputable proof that extraterrestrials have been to our world, now or in the past.

Mr. Hess politely heard me out, but I couldn't help but notice his wry smile. What sort of evidence would you need to make you change your mind? he asked. It would have to be pretty strong, I said. Stronger than anything I've seen so far, at least.

By then, Linda had returned to the counter with a biography she'd heard about. While I bought it for her, we briefly discussed where to have lunch. Mr. Hess recommended the Jekyll Island Club; now a resort hotel, its restaurant was open to the public, and he said that we'd probably enjoy the menu. Linda and I decided that this would be our next stop, so we left the bookstore and walked across the compound to the hotel, where we got a table on its courtyard terrace.

We were just finishing our Cobb salads when our waiter came to the table and asked if I happened to be Mr. Steele. Since my family didn't know exactly where Linda and I were, my first thought was that there had been some sort of emergency and that they were desperately trying to find me. But then he produced a thick manila envelope and explained that it had been dropped off at the club's front desk, with instructions that it be delivered to me. The waiter didn't know where it had come from or who had brought it to the restaurant; there was no name on the envelope, or any clue as to its origin.

Opening the envelope, I discovered a typewritten manuscript, its ink fading on paper already yellow with age. There was a breeze upon the terrace, so I didn't examine it then and there, but instead took it back to my hotel, where I read it that afternoon before getting dressed for the wedding. Because Linda and I had to leave early Sunday morning to begin the two-day drive back to Massachusetts, I didn't get a chance to return the manuscript to the bookstore, where I have little doubt it came from. I suspect, though, that Mr. Hess didn't want to get it back. Apparently he'd waited a long time for someone like me to come along, and the fact that subsequent attempts to contact him have been met with silence reinforces my opinion that he wishes to have this document made public.

I've inserted footnotes for the sake of clarity, but have otherwise left the manuscript unedited. I don't know whether to believe this story; that, I'll leave to the reader.

—A.M.S.

## I. The Millionaire

**M**y name is Solomon Hess, and I was once the personal valet of William Apollo Russell. It was in this capacity that I witnessed the terrifying events of March 1934, on Jekyll Island, Georgia, which have never been made public . . . until now, by my own hand.

As I write, twenty years later<sup>1</sup>, few people remember my former employer. His name has been largely forgotten, save by historians of American popular culture. In his day, though, William A. Russell was one of the most successful New York magazine publishers. Apollo Publications, Inc., which he established in 1919 upon the foundation of his late father's printing business, produced more than a dozen magazines every month. Although a few were respectable periodicals like *The American Liberty* and *Apollo Monthly*, most of them were cheap fiction magazines that catered to the masses: *Private Eye Mystery*, *Fascinating Science-Fiction*, *New York Romance*, *Silver Star Western*, and its bestselling title, *The Gang Buster*.<sup>2</sup>

It was from these "dime novels" that William A. Russell had become a wealthy man. In his late thirties, trim and athletic, with a high forehead beneath jet-black hair, he was a fixture of Manhattan high society, regularly seen in its more exclusive clubs and bistros. His residence was a townhouse just off Gramercy Park, where he regularly entertained the rich and influential, and among his possessions were a private Pullman sleeper car for when he travelled by rail to his 1,500-acre horse farm in the Berkshires. His financial assets were nearly bottomless, or so it seemed to anyone who knew him.

Yet William Russell was not without liabilities. His wife, Edith Russell, was a heavy drinker, and she wasn't entirely faithful to her husband. She was often spotted in various "speak-easies" on the lower East Side, usually in the company of younger men of less than sterling reputation, and Mr. Russell spent considerable time and money keeping her name out of the gossip columns. It was rumored that he hadn't gained his fortune entirely from the magazine business, but rather that he'd made an arrangement with a certain crime syndicate to allow them to smuggle liquor into the country inside rolls of paper trucked in from Canada. Indeed, one of the reasons why Apollo Publications produced so many titles was to deter suspicion from the vast amounts of pulp-stock it brought in from north of the border. Furthermore, it

<sup>1</sup> The manuscript wasn't dated, but judging by this remark, I believe that it was written in 1954.

<sup>2</sup> During the 1930s, Apollo Publications was the second-largest publisher of pulp fiction, rivaled only by Street & Smith.

was also the subject of hearsay that William Apollo Russell wasn't the name on his birth certificate, but instead one that he'd adopted in order to conceal his Jewish ancestry, which he apparently considered an impediment to acceptance within certain New York social circles.<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps my employer's worst problem was money: namely, how to keep it. Almost no one knew it at the time but, contrary to appearances, by the winter of 1933 Mr. Russell's financial situation had become rather precarious. He had invested heavily in the stock market, and while the crash of 1929 wasn't quite the disaster to him it had been to others, nevertheless he'd lost a considerable amount of money. Since the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment also caused the loss of his Prohibition-era income, his fortune had come to rely solely upon his magazine empire. And Mrs. Russell's lifestyle was costly to maintain, although it could hardly be said that Mr. Russell was frugal himself.

I was aware of all these things because of my close proximity to him. Someone such as William A. Russell may be able to conceal the truth from friends, business associates, and even the IRS or the FBI, but there's little that he can hide from his "gentleman's gentleman." And while I can't consider myself to have been his confidante, there wasn't much in his household that I didn't see.

How I came to be Mr. Russell's valet is worth noting. It wasn't my intent to be hired as such when I first visited the midtown offices of Apollo Publications in the summer of 1931. I was eighteen years old then, a recent graduate of DeWitt Clinton High in the Bronx, and it was my life's dream to become a writer. My family couldn't afford to send me to college, though, so I couldn't afford the benefits of a higher education. Thus I hoped to land a job at Apollo Publications, perhaps as an editorial assistant, and eventually work my way into the position of being a staff writer for *The American Liberty*.

A letter of introduction from my high school principal, a hand-me-down suit from an older cousin, and stack of clips from the school's literary magazine managed to get me an interview with William A. Russell. He greeted me cordially enough, but gave my stories and poems from *The Magpie* only a brief perusal before informing me that his company had no job openings, not even in the mailroom. However, he himself needed someone: a personal valet, a manservant who would lay out his clothes, remind him of appointments and social engagements, greet dinner guests at the door, bring him a cup of hot chocolate at bedtime, and all the other things for which a busy person needed assistance. I seemed to be a bright and eager young lad: would I be willing to take this job?

It wasn't what I was expecting, to be sure, but I immediately accepted the offer. My father was a tailor, so making sure that a man's clothes fit him well wasn't beyond me. The salary was generous, and since the job also included room and board in his Gramercy Park townhouse, I was intrigued by the prospect of rubbing elbows with New York's social elite. And I had my own private agenda as well. I believed, perhaps naively, that if I did well for Mr. Russell, he might be impressed enough by my performance to reward me with that position at *The American Liberty* I so dearly wanted.

In hindsight, though, I believe the real reason why Mr. Russell hired me to be his valet had less to do with what I could do than with who I was. If he was, indeed, a Jew himself, then my background mirrored his own. Although one might suspect that he was fulfilling some unconscious desire to have a young Jewish kid from the Bronx whom he could boss around, I rather believe that he simply wanted to give me a leg up in the world. Mr. Russell could be arrogant on occasion, but he was never

<sup>3</sup> This is true. According to Arthur Thomas's biography of William Apollo Russell, *American Pulp* (Prentice-Hall, 1983), he legally changed his name from Werner Aaron Rabinowitz in 1919, shortly after his father's death.

capricious or unkind, or at least not to me. At the very least, he treated me with far more respect than Mrs. Russell, whom he'd come to regard as little more than a hopeless drunk.

Indeed, I think her "delicate condition" was the reason why Mr. Russell joined the Jekyll Island Club. Climbing the social ladder was not something he had to worry about; he'd already been accepted into New York high society, and regularly saw many of the club's members in the salons and grilles of Manhattan. Instead, I believe that he simply wanted to get away from her. By then, he and Mrs. Russell were married in name only; they no longer slept in the same room, let alone the same bed, and it was only the likelihood of a costly and very public divorce that prevented him from throwing her out of the house. But Mrs. Russell hated to travel—unless it was to Paris, where she'd spend her days buying expensive outfits that she'd wear only once and her nights at the cabaret—and she was horrified by the prospect of wintering on some mosquito-infested island. Which suited my employer just fine; he'd go down south to Jekyll Island, while she . . . well, Mrs. Russell didn't know it at the time, but her husband had plans for her.

During the '20s, the Jekyll Island Club was still exclusive enough that it would have never admitted William A. Russell as a full member. By 1933, though, the situation had changed; most of its founding members had either died or were too old to travel, and the Depression had taken its toll on the fortunes of others, causing many to resign. So when its Board of Directors quietly announced that it would begin accepting applications for "associate memberships"—that is, people of wealth and means who were not necessarily among the hundred richest men in America—my employer leaped at the chance.

There was no question as to whether his application would be accepted. But just as he thought he'd have to settle for a clubhouse apartment, he chanced upon an opportunity that he couldn't ignore. Riverside, the waterfront cottage that had been the winter home of Manhattan bank magnate Eliot Sloan, came up for sale following his death earlier that year. His family no longer wanted his place on Jekyll Island, and although the asking price of \$180,000 was a severe pinch on Mr. Russell's finances, he dug deep into his bank account and bought the house virtually sight unseen. Next to that, his membership dues of seven hundred dollars were little more than pocket change.

So while Mrs. Russell was sent off to Connecticut for a winter vacation,<sup>4</sup> Mr. Russell and I packed up his wardrobe and boarded his private coach for the long train ride to Brunswick. I was his only servant to go with him; the rest stayed behind in New York. We arrived in the first week of January 1934, where we boarded the club's private launch, the *Sylvia*, for the final leg of our journey, a quick trip across St. Simons Sound and down the Jekyll River to the club's boat dock. A Ford flatbed truck was waiting for us there—one of very few automobiles on the island—and its colored driver loaded our trunks and suitcases before carrying us the short distance to Riverside.

## II. The Compound

As it turned out, Mr. Russell had gotten a bargain for his money. The cottage was built in the Cape Cod style, painted white, and quite handsome, with bay windows,

<sup>4</sup> Hess is being discreet here, but Russell's biography tells the whole story. In December, 1933, a New York judge ordered Edith Russell to spend six months in a Connecticut sanitarium, where she underwent treatment for alcoholism and nymphomania. This court-mandated stay, of course, was arranged by her husband.

an enclosed wrap-around porch, and a third-floor widow's walk. There was a lovely old willow tree in the front yard, its limbs draped with Spanish moss, and from the living-room windows we could see the Jekyll River just a couple of hundred yards away. The house had come completely furnished, and although most of the couches, chairs, and tables were unfashionably Victorian, Mr. Russell was charmed by their quaint luxury. However, upon visiting the kitchen, he made a point of reminding me to acquire the new Sears catalog: the fixtures were embarrassingly out-of-date, including an old-fashioned icebox instead of a modern refrigerator.

Once he settled in, though, it wasn't long before Mr. Russell became a fixture of the Jekyll Island social scene. He kept up with his business by mail and telephone; his mornings were usually spent in long-distance conversations with his associate publisher and various editors<sup>5</sup>, and every day I'd visit the island post office, sending letters to New York and picking up the same in return. Mr. Russell would knock off work around noon, at which time he'd leave me with the household chores and walk up the road to the clubhouse for lunch. His afternoons were devoted to one of any number of activities. When the weather was fair, he'd join a foursome on the club golf course, located a short distance inland from the compound. When it rained, he'd play tennis in the indoor courts or find partners for a few hands of bridge in the recreation center. Once the weather grew warm enough, he swam laps in the club pool. Although he wasn't a hunter, a couple of times he joined a party that would venture into the wooded marshlands in search of deer, quail, or even the occasional alligator unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Late in the day, Mr. Russell would return to Riverside. A brief nap, then I'd help him into his tails for dinner at the club (white tie was always required in the main dining room). Once there, he'd take a seat at his assigned table with other associate members, where they would dine on oysters, sea turtle soup, venison, grilled steak, and fresh greens from the club's vegetable garden, to be followed by brandy and cigars in the drawing room. Once or twice a week, he would have dinner at the cottage; he'd hired a couple of part-time cooks from the club's staff, a young Negro by the name of Robert and his wife Lilly, both of whom were wizards in the kitchen, and he'd invite over a few friends for an informal get-together.

For the most part, though, once he returned from the club, it was to spend a quiet evening at the cottage: smoking, reading, listening to the radio. By then, I had finished my chores for the day, and would use the time to pursue my own interests—that is, writing short stories on the Remington portable typewriter Mr. Russell had recently given me as a holiday present. Over the course of the last three years, I'd gradually come to realize that my prospects of joining *The American Liberty's* editorial staff were slim or none, and that my best chance of "breaking in" was to write stories for his pulps. Besides, I'd lately come to enjoy reading and writing science fiction; perhaps I wasn't destined to become the next Robert Benchley, but maybe I could share a contents page with Edward E. Smith or Jack Williamson. So I worked in my little room next to the pantry, sitting on the edge of my bed with my typewriter on a folding table.

I had no intentions of showing my work to my employer—frankly, I was a bit embarrassed by the space adventures I was now writing—but he gradually became interested in what I was doing, and finally asked to see my stories. Mr. Russell was a

<sup>5</sup> The Jekyll Island Club participated in the first transcontinental "party line" phone conversation, in a ceremony held on January 15, 1915, that included President Woodrow Wilson phoning in from the White House, Alexander Graham Bell calling from New York, his assistant Thomas Watson speaking in San Francisco, and William Rockefeller speaking to everyone from the clubhouse.



businessman, but I think that he fancied himself to be an editor as well; he admitted that he didn't like science fiction very much, though, and had started *Fascinating* only because "that junk" made money. He read my work and offered critiques that, while not always valuable, nevertheless gave me an insight as to what he wanted from his writers. This continued to give me hope that he'd eventually come around to giving me an editorial job, even if he seemed to be more impressed by my talent at ironing his shirts.

In this way, the winter of 1934 was passed in a state of blissful indolence. Picnics on the beach, tennis matches on the outdoor courts, card games at the club; for the privileged few who made the island their second home, it was easy to pretend that life was free and easy, and forget that men and women were standing in line outside soup kitchens or a fanatical regime had risen to power in Germany. For a few months, Mr. Russell was as happy as I'd ever seen him; sometimes he even spoke of moving to Jekyll Island permanently, even though he knew that the club closed down after Easter, at which time all his friends would return to New York, Chicago, and Boston. But I think that he was relieved to be away from the burdens of both a struggling business and a failing marriage, if only for a short time.

I didn't share any of Mr. Russell's pastimes, of course. Servants weren't allowed in the clubhouse, save for the club's own employees, nor did we have permission to enjoy its facilities. The servants and staff members lived in what was called Red Row, a collection of cabins and boarding houses located in the rear acreage of the compound. Practically a village in itself, it included a one-room school and playground for their children, along with its own general store and laundry. Once I got to know Robert and Lilly a little better, they invited me over to their place for dinner. The club's seasonal employees were a mixed bag of colored people, white Southerners, and working-class Irish from the cities of the North, so the lines of segregation were observed on Red Row, but no one made an issue of a white man visiting a Negro home. And I found that they had their own simple pleasures, such as employee picnics during their days off, and it wasn't long before I was invited to join them when Mr. Russell didn't need me.

It was during one of those picnics that I met Elizabeth Marley, an unmarried young woman whose family had escaped the Kansas dustbowl to resettle in Georgia. Elizabeth—or Betty, as she preferred to be called—worked as a housekeeper at the club and lived by herself in the women's dormitory. She was very shy about me at first, until I let her know that I had harbored no dishonorable intentions, and she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever met. It wasn't long before I fell in love with her.

In that, I was more fortunate than Mr. Russell. From time to time, while on one errand or another that would take me through the clubhouse grounds, I'd spot him in the company of women. There were a few single ladies among the members of the Jekyll Island Club, most of them the elder daughters of wealthy families but also the occasional gay divorcee, and Mr. Russell saw them regularly on the tennis courts or at the poolside. Yet he was all too aware of the fact that he couldn't pursue any of them seriously, or even indulge in a furtive affair. Many of the club members were from the same social circles as the ones he belonged to in New York, and gossip travels as fast as a telegram among such people. If it became known that George A. Russell was courting another woman, it would only be a matter of time before the news reached his estranged wife. Mrs. Russell may have been a drunk, but she knew a few prominent lawyers, and the inevitable divorce would deprive him of what remained of his fortune. So however much Mr. Russell might have liked otherwise, I can attest that he always went to bed alone, and never spent a night away from Riverside.



So he and I spent our winter months on Jekyll Island in a relaxed sort of way, far from the cold streets of New York. And our sabbatical may have ended as little more than a memorable vacation were it not for the strange occurrences of one Saturday night on the last weekend of March, and the horror that soon followed.

### III. The Mystery

I was walking back to the cottage from Red Row when it happened. It was a warm evening, and Mr. Russell had let me off work early so that I could have dinner with Betty at her dorm. We'd sat out on one of the picnic tables for a little while afterward, but since she had to get up early the next morning for her job at the club, I'd kissed her goodnight before heading back to Riverside. So I was outside, and thus saw the whole thing.

An abrupt boom from somewhere high above caused me to stop and look up. My first thought was that it was thunder, yet the sky was clear, with no signs of an approaching storm. As it so happened, I was on one of the footpaths between the cottages, out from beneath the trees that would have otherwise interfered with my view, and thus I was able to see the fireball that raced across the starlit sky.

I'd seen meteors before, of course, on those rare occasions when my family escaped from the city for a weekend in the Catskills, yet what I saw was nothing like that. Larger and brighter than any falling star, it raced westward across the heavens. In less time than it takes to tell, the object vanished behind the trees . . . and yet, in the instant before I lost sight of it, I had the distinct impression that it slowed down, almost as if it was somehow braking its descent.

From somewhere nearby, I heard voices raised in astonishment. I'd barely realized that I wasn't the only person to witness this phenomenon when, in the far distance, another sound reached my ears: a second boom, not as loud as the first but nevertheless quite audible, as if something had impacted the Atlantic Ocean on the other side of the island. Then nothing, save for a soft, warm rush of air that stirred the tree limbs, as if the object had caused a strange wind to fall across the island.

Again, I heard voices. Looking down, I noticed for the first time a number of people standing in the gardens of the nearby Crane Cottage. Apparently the incident had drawn the attention of those attending an outdoor party. Against the cottage's lighted windows, I saw several silhouetted figures gazing up in amazement, with some pointing to the sky.

Yet I thought little of what I'd seen, other than to consider myself lucky to have spotted a larger-than-normal meteorite on its way to the earth. I made a wish—that Betty and I would somehow stay together, as I recall—then continued my walk back to Riverside. At least I'd have a story to tell Mr. Russell when I saw him again in a few minutes.

Once I reached the cottage, though, I found that my employer wasn't around. His hat and coat were missing from the rack by the front door, so I figured that he must have stepped out for the evening. Perhaps he was at the party I'd seen. So I puttered around in the kitchen for a few minutes, straightening up a bit, then fetched a bottle of beer from the brand-new refrigerator and took it to my room. The night was still young, and I decided to write a couple of pages before Mr. Russell came home, when he'd want his customary hot chocolate before bedtime.

Yet I'd barely written more than a few paragraphs when I heard the front door bang open, and a moment later Mr. Russell rushed into my room. Wild-eyed and out of breath, it appeared as if he'd run all the way back to the cottage.

"My God, Sol," he exclaimed, "did you see that?"

I didn't need to ask what he meant. "I certainly did, sir," I said, calmly smiling at him from behind the typewriter. "Wasn't that a hoot?"

"A hoot?" He regarded me with astonishment, as if I'd just witnessed a herd of wild elephants stampeding down Fifth Avenue and could only say, *Well, isn't that a stitch?* "Is that all you. . . ?" Then he shook his head as he cast his eyes around the room. "Never mind. Isn't there a flashlight around here?"

"Yes, sir . . . in the utility closet." I pushed aside my folding table. "I'll find it for. . ."

"I'll get it myself." He turned away from me, darting in the direction of the closet where I kept the household tools. "Go upstairs and pull out my outdoor clothes. That includes the swamp boots and my cap. Hurry!"

I'd seldom seen him quite so impatient, not even when running late for some social event. And never before had he ever rushed out at this late hour, save perhaps the time Mrs. Russell had been found by the New York police sitting astride one of the Public Library lions with a bottle of Scotch in hand. But it wasn't my place to ask why, only to do what I was told. So while he turned the utility closet upside-down searching for the flashlight, I went up to his bedroom and laid out the canvas trousers, denim shirt, waterproof knee boots, and fisherman's cap that he wore when hunting. I'd scarcely placed them on the bureau when he jogged up the stairs and, throwing off his evening clothes, put on the outdoor gear as hastily as if the house was on fire.

When he sat down on the bed to pull on his boots, I ventured the obvious question. "Mr. Russell, if I may ask. . . ?"

"It came down on the other side of the island," he snapped. "Of that, we're quite positive. You mean you didn't see . . . I mean, hear . . . it?" Before I could respond, he went on. "Renny, Phil, and I are going out there at once. If it's a meteorite and it hit the beach, we may be able to locate it while the tide is still low."

I couldn't help but smile when he said that. Perhaps I hadn't gone to college, but I'd learned enough about meteorites during my high school science classes to know that their chances of finding a newly fallen space rock were remote at best. Even if the meteorite had hit dry land, and not simply been swallowed up by the ocean, in all likelihood it would be so small as to be indistinguishable from any other random object one might find on a beach.

Yet I didn't say anything. Mr. Russell and his friends—Arleigh Renwick, Phillip Sidwell, perhaps a few other club members he'd neglected to mention—were obviously spoiling for an adventure. Over the last few months, they'd whiled away the time with golf games and tennis matches, and perhaps they'd become bored with all that. So here was something new: a late-night sortie to the island's uninhabited Atlantic side, in search of a trophy more exotic than another buck head. Far be it from me to ruin their fun with some inconvenient facts.

An automobile horn honked just outside the cottage. Mr. Russell yanked his left boot the rest of the way on, then snatched up the flashlight and bolted from the room. "No need to wait up for me, Sol!" he yelled over his shoulder as he dashed down the stairs, taking the risers two at a time. "I'll be back late!"

"Very good, sir," I replied, but I don't think he heard me before he charged through the front door. When I went down to close it behind him, I caught a glimpse of the headlights of Mr. Renwick's old Model-T "island car" heading down Riverview Drive.

I went to bed shortly after that, and didn't hear Mr. Russell return. But when I rose early the next morning, I found him in the living room. He'd fallen asleep on a couch, still wearing his clothes; his boots were caked with moist sand, as were the knees of his trousers. He'd apparently been too exhausted to go upstairs to bed, so I laid a blanket across him, then went to the kitchen to make coffee.

He slept through the better part of the morning, and when he finally woke up, he said very little to me, but instead went upstairs to take a bath. I had just made a late breakfast of bacon and eggs when he reappeared. Wearing only his robe, he took a seat at the dining room table and wolfed down his food. He said nothing about where he'd gone or what he'd done. Figuring that he was in one of his moods, I went about my chores without trying to make conversation.

I'd just collected his soiled clothes and was about to add them to the laundry hamper when he stopped me. "Don't bother," he said. "I'll be wearing them again today."

"Very well, sir." I turned to carry them back upstairs, then my curiosity got the better of me. "Did you find the meteorite you were searching for?"

Mr. Russell said nothing for a moment. "Sol . . . how well can I trust you?"

That stopped me. This was something he'd never asked before, perhaps because he'd never had reason to question my loyalty. In the four years that I'd lived and worked in his household, I'd become privy to most of his secrets: his underworld connections, his wife's bad behavior, the rocky state of his finances, even the rumor that he was actually a Jew. But I'd never revealed anything that I'd learned about his private life, and there was an unspoken agreement between us that I never would. So it was odd—and, yes, a bit of an insult—that, after all this time, he'd actually come right out and ask whether he could trust me.

"Implicitly, Mr. Russell," I replied, looking him straight in the eye. "You should know that by now."

He slowly nodded, apparently satisfied by my reply. "I thought so," he said. "I think . . ." Another pause, as if he had some final reluctance that he needed to overcome. "I think I need your assistance," he went on. "A matter of a rather . . . well, unusual nature."

My curiosity became greater. "The meteorite, sir?"

The slightest of smiles. "There was no meteorite. We found something else entirely. I'm going back there today, and I'd like you to come with me. I think you may . . . ah, be able to offer certain insights as to what we've discovered."

He wouldn't tell me more, though, but instead asked me to put his outdoor clothes back where I'd found them, and instructed me to dress in the same fashion. So I returned his clothes to his room, then went to put on the clothes I usually wore for cutting the grass or trimming the hedges. I'd just put together a picnic lunch when he came back downstairs, again dressed the same way as he had been before. As an afterthought, he added a notebook and a couple of pencils to my picnic basket, and then we left the cottage.

I'd assumed that Mr. Renwick would be picking us up in his car, so I was surprised when we set out on foot instead. An unpaved automobile road led across Jekyll Island to the Atlantic side, but once we reached the golf course, we left the road and cut across the fairways. At one point, we spotted a couple of club members on the ninth hole green; although Mr. Russell recognized them, he quietly insisted that we cut through the woods to avoid being seen. I followed him through the thickets until we reached a bridle path that eventually brought us to the dirt road that ran parallel to the beach.

Noticing fresh tire tracks, I figured that this was the way Mr. Renwick had driven the night before. But Mr. Russell didn't say anything about this as we followed the road for a couple of miles, heading toward the island's remote southern tip. We'd almost reached Jekyll Point when the tire tracks abruptly left the road, leading into the scrub-covered dunes that bordered the beach. We followed the tracks, and fifty feet from the road came upon two automobiles—Mr. Renwick's Model T and a Chrysler roadster I recognized as belonging to Cecil Hadley—hidden behind a dense wall of brush.

"Damn," Mr. Russell murmured upon seeing them. "The others are already here." He turned to me. "Remember, Sol . . . no matter what the others may say, you're with me. You're here as a consultant, not as my valet. Understand?"

Mystified, I nodded. "Understood, sir."

He hesitated. "And one more thing . . . what you're about to see is a secret of the highest order. You're to never, ever, speak or write about this without my express permission. Can I count on you to be quiet about this?"

"Yes, sir, you can."

He must have noticed the nervous tremor in my voice, for a smile crossed his face. "If this works out, your silence will be amply rewarded." I nodded again, and he gave me what was meant to be a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Very well, then . . . come with me."

#### IV. The Horror

**F**ollowing the footprints left behind by the others, we made our way through the dunes until we came to the beach. About sixty yards away, several men had gathered around an enormous object that lay at the water's edge. Dark gray, about seventy feet in length, it rested upon the white sand like some giant mollusk that had been washed ashore by the morning tide. My first thought was that it was a beached whale, but as we came closer, I saw that it wasn't that at all.

It was a creature, all right, but unlike any that I'd ever seen before. Lying prone on the beach, with its head and forequarters upon the sand and its feet and tail in the surf, it resembled some prehistoric beast that had emerged from time's abyss after a long sleep of countless millions of years. Its long arms lay at its sides, exposing long-fingered claws large enough to seize a full-grown man, while its legs were muscular and forward-jointed, obviously capable of standing upright. Rising from the great hump of its back was a serrated dorsal fin that tapered off at its long neck, at the end of which was a triangular, serpent-like skull, with a lipless mouth beneath a blunt snout and small eyes—both closed, thankfully—set deep within a ridged forehead.

In all, the creature looked a bit like a tyrannosaur . . . and yet, as soon as I saw it, I knew that it hadn't evolved on our world. Perhaps it was only intuition, but I realized that no paleontologist had ever discovered fossil remains of anything like this in the Black Hills of North Dakota. Whatever this thing was, it wasn't from Earth.

The men who'd come here earlier had brought one of the club's picnic tents with them. They had erected it a short distance up the beach from the monster; a couple of lawn chairs were set up within its shade, and it appeared that they'd brought their own wicker basket as well. Someone had even gone to the trouble of collecting driftwood for a small bonfire, although it hadn't been lit yet. A half-dozen club members stood around the creature; dressed in seersucker jackets and straw boating hats, they could have been having a midday clam bake. As Mr. Russell and I approached them, Mr. Sidwell raised his hand in greeting while the others simply stared at us.

"For God's sake, Bill," Mr. Renwick said once we joined them. "Didn't we agree to keep our mouths shut about this?"

He didn't look directly at me as he said this, but I had no doubt that I was the object of his disapproval. The others glared at me; it was obvious that a lowly manservant was the last person they wanted to have join their party.

"Relax, Renny." My employer favored him with an easy-going smile. "Sol has been

sworn to secrecy. He has certain expertise in such matters, and I thought it wise to bring him in."

I almost laughed out loud when he said this. My formal education had ended with a high school diploma; I was an expert only in how to knot Mr. Russell's dinner tie. Before I could say anything, though, Mr. Russell put his arm around my shoulder. "Gentlemen," he said, addressing the group as a whole, "if you haven't met him before, this is Mr. Solomon Hess. Sol's presently employed as my valet, yes, but he's also a writer, and I've read enough of his work to know that he's an astute thinker in subjects of a speculative nature."

Which was a roundabout way of saying that I wrote science fiction. Yet it seemed to disarm the men standing before me, because they each stepped forward to shake my hand, albeit reluctantly. I was already familiar with them, of course—Renwick, Sidwell, and Hadley, and also George Collier, Lester Smith, and Byron DuMont—but until then I'd been an invisible man, someone beneath their notice. Yet if Mr. Russell was willing to vouch for me, they had little choice but to acknowledge my presence.

"Well then, Sol," Mr. Hadley said, once the introductions were made, "perhaps you can shed some light on our little mystery."

His words were pleasant enough, but he was obviously testing his friend's claim that I was some sort of great scientific thinker. From the corner of my eye, I could see Mr. Russell watching me expectantly, perhaps hoping that I wouldn't embarrass him in front of his friends. *I don't know what it is either* was the truthful response, but it was also the one that simply wouldn't do.

I didn't respond at once, but instead approached the creature. It lay inert upon the beach, with no visible movement whatsoever, yet as I came closer, I noticed something peculiar. Although seagulls and terns wheeled about it, squawking as they pirouetted overhead, never once did they alight upon its head or back.

"You found it last night?" I asked.

"Just as you see it." Mr. Russell stepped away from his friends to join me. "We thought at first it may have been a meteorite, but when we got close to it . . ." He grinned. "Well, it's no meteorite, that much is certain."

"And it hasn't moved since then . . . um, sir?"

A couple of smiles from Mr. Collier and Mr. Hadley; they hadn't missed the deferential way in which I'd addressed Mr. Russell. "No, not at all," he said. "Don't worry. It's quite plainly dead."

I looked up at the circling birds. "I don't think so. If it were, then the gulls would be all over it."

No one said anything, but I couldn't help but notice that a few of the men took a nervous step back. Mr. Hadley remained skeptical. "I don't care what it looks like," he said. "It's not an animal, either dead or alive. See for yourself . . . place your hand on it."

I was reluctant to do so. If this thing had come from outer space, then there was a chance that it might be radioactive. But there was no Geiger counter on hand, and I was being put on the spot, so I had little choice but to walk up to the creature and gently lay my palm against its side. I was surprised to find not the warm flesh of a mammal, or even the cool skin of a reptile, but instead a cold surface that was flexible yet nonetheless vaguely metallic. And when I peered more closely at the creature, I noticed what appeared to be seams between its shoulder and biceps, and also at its elbow; the same for its lower neck, and also the hinge of its jaw.

At the time, I hadn't yet encountered industrial-grade plastics; in hindsight, that may have been what it was made of. The fact that the thing had distinct junctures at its joints hinted that it was not organic in nature. And yet, as my hand lay upon its side, I felt a faint, almost rhythmic vibration from deep within its body, much that

which I would expect from a slumbering animal. Despite what Mr. Hadley said, I had the distinct impression that this was a living machine.<sup>6</sup>

"Well?" Mr. Russell stood behind me, awaiting my verdict. "What do you think, Sol?"

I stepped away from the creature. "I'm not sure, but this may be some sort of robot." Noticing his uncomprehending expression, I tried to explain what I meant. "An automaton, that is . . . a device deliberately built to resemble a living creature."

"Really?" Mr. Hadley remained skeptical. "If so, who the devil would build such a thing? Not only that, but where did it come from?"

"The Germans, most likely." This from Mr. Smith, who stood near the creature's snout, examining its closed eyes. "Probably brought here by submarine, and left to baffle whoever found it."

A derisive snort from Mr. DuMont. "Oh, come now, Lester . . . you think the krauts are behind everything."

"I have to agree," I said quietly. "I don't believe this is from Germany . . . or anywhere else on Earth, for that matter."

They fell silent, each of them staring at me in astonishment. Judging from their expressions, I realized that what I'd said was beyond the reach of their imaginations. These men perceived the world in ordinary terms; for them, there was little that couldn't be explained by actuarial charts or departmental reports or the *Wall Street Journal*. They'd never been called upon to see past the here-and-now, save perhaps next-quarter projections. And here I was, asking them to consider the possibility of life beyond our world.

"Poppycock," Mr. Smith said at last. "This is nothing but an elaborate hoax."

Mr. Russell cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, you're looking at this entirely the wrong way. It doesn't matter where this thing came from, really . . . only that it's here, and that it presents an opportunity that we'd be foolish to miss."

"Hear, hear!" Mr. Renwick stepped to Mr. Russell's side. "Listen to what he has to say. I think he's onto something." He clapped a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Go on, Bill."

"As I was saying, we've found something here that could be quite profitable, if handled correctly." Speaking to the others as if they were seated in a corporate boardroom, Mr. Russell clasped his hands together as he stood before the creature. "Since this object washed up on our island, it rightfully belongs to us. . . ."

"The state of Georgia might argue with that," Mr. Collier murmured.

"And my attorneys might argue with the state of Georgia," Mr. Russell replied, and this earned smug laughter from the others. "Be that as it may, once we arrange for its transportation, I believe that we could exhibit it commercially. Perhaps license it to someone in the entertainment business."

"The Barnum circus!" Mr. DuMont exclaimed.

"Perhaps." Mr. Russell nodded his head. "Or maybe someone in Hollywood would be better suited. Whatever the venue may be, though, I propose that the seven of us form a partnership to exploit this to our best advantage. My magazines would be the logical starting point, of course, but there's also potential for radio and motion pictures, not to mention . . ."

As he spoke, understanding slowly dawned upon the faces of the other men. They might not think much of the possibility of extraterrestrial life, but they knew a great deal about money and its acquisition. No doubt they'd all been hurt by the Depression, or they'd all been searching for new investment ventures. They began to see the scenario that Mr. Russell painted for them: the creature, loaded onto a railroad flatbed car, making a cross-country tour of carnivals and state fairs where curious locals would

<sup>6</sup> It appears Hess was trying to describe a biomechanism, but lacked the modern-day terminology for it.



pay for the privilege of stepping into a circus tent to view the abomination with their own eyes. The tour would be promoted by magazine articles, newsreels, and radio stories, with profits further maximized by the sale of souvenir pamphlets, postcards, and pennants, tin-toy replicas, jigsaw puzzles, or whatever else could be brought to market.

By much the same token, though, I knew at once that proper scientific examination was the farthest thing from anyone's mind. In time, perhaps, researchers would be given a chance to study this mysterious thing. Only if were willing to pay for the privilege, though; these men would be smart enough not to let anyone see it for free.

By the time Mr. Russell was finished, his friends were practically dancing with glee. The creature itself would have to be a closely guarded secret until everything was in place, of course, but no one was worried about that; it wouldn't be the first time that the club concocted a private business deal.<sup>7</sup> The island's ocean side was uninhabited, so the creature could be covered by tarps until the time came for it to be removed by barge and carried to the mainland.

Then Mr. Renwick had a flash of inspiration. Walking over to the tent, he opened the picnic basket he'd brought with him and produced a bottle of champagne and a Kodak Brownie. After popping the cork and giving the bottle to Mr. Sidwell, he had the others stand in front of the creature; what they needed to commemorate their discovery, he said, was a group photo. The gentlemen were only too happy to comply, but it was Mr. Russell who just insisted on having the most prominent place in the picture. With assistance from Mr. DuMont and Mr. Hadley, he climbed atop the creature's head. Arms crossed, feet planted just above its eyes, his pose was that of a man who'd conquered a monster.

Once everyone was ready, Mr. Renwick handed the camera to me. Its plate was already loaded; all I'd need to do was aim, focus, and press the shutter. It was then that I realized what my role in all this would be. Despite Mr. Russell's promise, I wasn't to be a partner but only a servant, as invisible as always. It wasn't my place to protest, though, so I made sure that the men were properly lined up before I raised the camera and peered through the viewfinder. It was then that I noticed that the creature's eyes were open.

At first, I thought it was only an illusion, an odd reflection caused by sunlight falling on the camera lens. Where there had once been closed eyelids, two oyster-white orbs now stared straight at me, their gaze unnoticed by the men who stood with their backs turned toward the creature.

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. Yet I'd just looked up from the camera when Mr. Russell suddenly lost his balance. "Good heavens," he exclaimed as he struggled to stay on his feet, "I think this thing just. . .!"

And then the creature's arms moved from its sides, pulling forward to plant its claws into the sand. Mr. Sidwell turned to see this and yelled a warning to the others. An instant later, Mr. Russell toppled from his perch; arms flailing, he fell to the ground, landing on his back.

By now, the rest of the party were aware that the creature was waking up. As it began to rise, they broke ranks and began to run, falling over themselves and each other in their haste to get away. I turned to run as well, but then I looked back and saw that Mr. Russell still lay where he'd fallen. Apparently frozen in terror, he watched with astonishment as the creature slowly pushed itself upward on its arms, its feet and tail emerging from the surf as it started to rise.

<sup>7</sup> A reference to a secret conference held at the Jekyll Island Club in 1910, when a small group of members, along with Rhode Island Senator Nelson Aldrich and several economic experts, met to plan the restructure of the American banking system. The Federal Reserve System was the result of this meeting.



I dropped the camera and ran to my employer. From behind me, I heard the loud report of gunshots. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that Mr. Renwick had pulled a small revolver from his coat pocket and was firing at the thing. If his shots had any effect, though, I didn't stop to see, for in the next second I was at Mr. Russell's side, grabbing him by the lapels and hoisting him to his feet.

Beneath the startled cries of the men behind me, I heard a faint, almost mechanical sound: a whirring and clinking, as if servomotors within the creature were putting its armored joints into motion. Looking around, I saw the thing now stood erect; hunched forward, with its long tail raised to counterbalance the rest of its body, it towered above the beach, the blank orbs of its eyes studying the men with malevolent intent.

By then, Mr. Renwick had run out of bullets. Apparently realizing that he hadn't stopped the creature, he dropped the gun and started to back away. But then he noticed the Brownie where I'd dropped it. A moment of hesitation, then he darted for the camera. Perhaps he thought I'd managed to take the picture and wanted to save it. I'll never know the reason for his rash and foolish action, because he'd just snatched up the camera when the creature lunged forward.

I barely had time to be amazed by how quickly the monster was capable of moving before it hurled itself upon Mr. Renwick. He didn't even have a chance to scream before the creature's clawed right foot came down on him. A sickening crunch, then a gout of blood rushed from his mouth as he was crushed beneath the monster's enormous mass.

The camera had fallen aside, apparently undamaged . . . and then the creature did something that haunts me to this day. Ignoring Mr. Renwick's corpse, it turned its head to peer at the camera. A second or two passed, and then it deliberately lifted its right foot again and brought it down on the Brownie, obliterating it as easily as it had its owner. It was as if the monster knew what it was, and didn't want to leave behind any evidence of its existence.

The rest of the group had taken cover behind the dunes, but they hadn't left the scene entirely; I could hear them shouting to Mr. Russell and me, begging us to run for our lives. But when the creature attacked Mr. Renwick, it put itself between us and the dunes. There was only the ocean behind us now, and I immediately knew that the cold blue waters of the Atlantic wouldn't hide us from the thing's murderous rampage.

As if remembering that two men still remained on the beach, the creature turned toward Mr. Russell and me. We stood next to each other, transfixed by the monster towering above us. For a timeless moment it stood silent and still, swaying slightly upon its haunches as its awful eyes studied us. I had the impression that it was trying to make up its mind which of us to kill next. If that were so, then only one of us stood even the slightest chance of escape. . . .

Apparently the same thought occurred to Mr. Russell, because in the next second, I felt two strong hands plant themselves against my back and shove me forward.

As I fell to my hands and knees, Mr. Russell sprinted in the opposite direction. Stunned by the realization that he'd betrayed me, I could only watch as he ran down the beach. Yet, even though I was easy prey, the creature regarded me for only a brief second before it turned to race after him.

Hearing the monster's heavy footfalls behind him, Mr. Russell glanced back over his shoulder. Crying out in terror, he started to run faster, and for a second or two I thought he might actually get away. Yet the creature easily caught up with him. Reaching forward with its left arm, it knocked him off his feet with one swipe of its claws, ripping the back of his shirt and sending him sprawling across the sand.

At first, I thought Mr. Russell's back was broken, but then I saw him rise to his hands and knees. Although stunned by the blow, he retained enough of his wits to try to crawl away. Yet the creature wasn't about to let him escape. Moving forward to plant its immense feet on either side of him, it bent over him, its mouth agape.

Thinking that he was about to be eaten alive, I screamed in horror. But then something rushed from the creature's jaws: milk-white fluid, thick and almost gelatinous, that completely covered Mr. Russell. He cried out again and tried to rise, but he was totally inundated by the fluid. Sticky tendrils still dangled from the monster's mouth, and as I watched, its jaws expanded the way a Burmese python's do when it's about to swallow its prey.

And then, with a grotesque sucking sound, the creature seemed to inhale the fluid. As it did so, it pulled Mr. Russell from the ground. He was still alive; I could see him thrashing against the material that had ensnared him. But the fluid was too thick for him to fight against; within seconds, he was pulled into the creature's mouth.

Closing its jaws, it lifted its head and straightened its neck as if to swallow him whole. For a moment, I thought I still heard Mr. Russell, howling like a madman from deep within the monster's gullet, but then this sound was lost to me as the creature turned in my direction.

Still on my knees, knowing that any attempt to flee would be futile, I waited for the creature to come for me. Yet it only regarded me with what seemed to be indifference before turning away again, this time to stomp back up the beach to where Mr. Renwick lay. Bending over again, it reached down with its left claw to pluck his pulverized corpse from the sand. And then, clutching the limp body against its massive chest, it pivoted on its hind legs and stalked away, heading for the water.

I'll never know why the creature ignored me as it went by. From the dunes, I heard the loud crack of a rifle; I'd later learn that Mr. Hadley had run back to his car to retrieve the hunting rifle he kept in its trunk. If any of his bullets actually hit the creature, though, there was no indication, for the monster paid no further attention to me or anyone else as it marched into the surf. It remained visible for the few seconds it took for it to reach the deeper waters a dozen yards out, then it abruptly lurched forward and disappeared beneath the waves.

And then it was gone.

## V. The Sentinel

As I wrote at the beginning of this account, it's not until now that I've committed my recollections to paper. There's a reason for this: I've been sworn to secrecy, first by the club members who witnessed the events, and later by others.

When it was all over, there was no real evidence that the creature had ever been there; all that it left behind was a destroyed camera, some enormous footprints, and a bloodstained patch of sand. Even before they left the beach, the others came to the conclusion that no one else would ever believe them; the story was just too incredible. Not only that, but they agreed that the consequences of trying to make anyone believe them were potentially devastating. Hadley, Sidwell, DuMont, Collier, and Smith all had much to lose, and they feared the loss of wealth and reputation.

Thus they decided, then and there, to invent a more believable explanation for the disappearances of William Russell and Arleigh Renwick. During a beachside picnic, Mr. Renwick decided to go for a swim, but he went too far out from shore and was caught in a riptide. Mr. Russell swam in to rescue him, but he suffered the same fate as well. Both were swept out to sea, never to be seen again.

I refused to go along with this at first, until I was told, in no uncertain terms, that if I attempted to reveal the truth, the others would disavow me. Furthermore, they would claim that I'd murdered both Mr. Russell and Mr. Renwick, weighting their bodies with heavy rocks and casting them into the ocean, and then come up with this

outlandish tale in an attempt to cover my crime. In the end, it would be my word against theirs; if I didn't end up in the electric chair, I'd spend the rest of my life in an insane asylum.

I had little choice but to go along with them. Truth be told, I was angered by Mr. Russell's cowardice, at the way he'd been willing to sacrifice my life to save his own. The lie made him seem more heroic than he actually was. On the other hand, the truth was something none of us were ready to admit, even to ourselves. So while I didn't argue very long or hard with Mr. Russell's friends, I privately vowed never to trust any of them again.

As it turned out, they couldn't be trusted even amongst themselves, because one of the six apparently did speak with someone in authority. Only a day after the tragic story of Mr. Russell's and Mr. Renwick's untimely deaths appeared in the newspapers, I was paid an unexpected visit.

I was still on Jekyll Island, packing up Mr. Russell's belongings, when two men appeared at the cottage's front door. Although they wore civilian clothes, they produced credentials identifying themselves as belonging to U.S. Army intelligence, whereupon they let me know that they knew what had really happened two days earlier. They spent the afternoon interviewing me, and once they had my side of the story, they made me an offer that I dared not refuse.

The island has been my home ever since.

The Jekyll Island Club closed during World War II. By then, Betty and I had gotten married, and for a few years we worked as the club's custodians, taking care of its shuttered and unvisited buildings. But the club didn't reopen after the war, and eventually the property was purchased by the state of Georgia, with the nearby cottages either sold or simply abandoned. Indeed, once Mrs. Russell inherited her husband's estate, one of the first things she did was sell Riverside. She retained ownership of her late husband's publishing company, but eventually Apollo Publications went bankrupt, killed by the wartime paper shortage and the changing tastes of the public. The last I heard of her, she was still living off William A. Russell's money, her Gramercy Park townhouse lined with bottles and boys.<sup>8</sup>

I still write on occasion, although my ambitions to become a noted author are a thing of the past. For a time, I contributed stories to a variety of science fiction magazines; all were published under a pseudonym<sup>9</sup>, though, and none allude to that terrible day. This is the first and last time I'll ever write about what I saw. I intend for it to remain locked in my file cabinet until my death, when it'll pass to my heirs. Perhaps my son George, who is still only a teenager, will decide one day to let it become public. For his own sake, though, I hope that he will wait until such a time comes when he believes disclosure will be in the world's best interests.

For the most part, I abide by my agreement with the government. Every month, I receive a generous check from Uncle Sam that allows me to live in reasonable comfort. In return, I keep quiet about what I witnessed. And every day, I visit the ocean, where I look for any indications that the creature may have returned.

I don't know where it came from, or why it was here, or where it has gone. Only William A. Russell ever learned these things. The creature must have had its reasons for taking him, and the possibilities of what they were are what keep me up at night. In my nightmares, I still hear him screaming.

The creature has never returned. Nonetheless, I'm afraid that it may come back one day, and that it may not come alone. ○

<sup>8</sup> Edith Russell died in New York in 1959.

<sup>9</sup> I've attempted to learn the pseudonym Solomon Hess used, yet this information isn't available in any of the standard literary references.

# NEXT ISSUE

## FEBRUARY ISSUE

Our February issue features a sprawling new novella by the award-winning **Stephen Baxter**, set in the same slightly shifted past of his Locus-award nominated novelette "The Ice War," which appeared in these pages in September of 2008. You don't have to be familiar with that story to enjoy "The Ice Line," which features some of the descendents of those august personalities as they deal with the oncoming threat of Napoleon's invading Grande Armée as it makes its way through England's interior. The story of how Baxter's terrifying Phoebeans (and a peculiar kind of undersea conveyance) are used in the war effort against old Boney, and with what dreadful consequences, awaits you in February!

## ALSO IN FEBRUARY

February features three *Asimov's* debuts that are sure to turn heads: "Stone Wall Truth," by gifted newcomer **Caroline M. Yoachim**, is a tale of tribal warfare and medicine, and how the two are both inextricably opposed and yet forever linked—we think you'll find Yoachim's treatment brave, insightful, and even a little uncomfortable; **Aliette de Bodard** contributes a lovely and affecting story of post-singularity human beings who have achieved a sort of Zen satori in spite of their banishment by a cruel future-dynasty, and the not-yet-awakened monks who inhabit the spaces between the two in "The Wind-Blown Man"; and **David Erik Nelson's** zany "The Bold Explorer in the Place Beyond" is sure to remind you of gonzo greats like Neal Barrett, Jr. and Howard Waldrop, not to mention Walt Kelly's redoubtable *Pogo*! The venerable talents are also on display during February, with the return of **Bruce McAllister**, who offers a nostalgic and haunting ghost tale of northern Italy and "The Woman Who Waited Forever"; and **Damien Broderick**, who continues his unofficial series of *trous de force* inspired by classic SF talents, with "Dead Air" a Phil-Dickian meditation of claustrophobic urban sprawl and the recently deceased visiting from beyond the grave and through your television screen.

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg**, in his Reflections column, continues his survey of the classic works of science fiction by "Rereading Clarke"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you're sure to enjoy. Look for our February issue on sale at your newsstand on December 22, 2009. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—in classy and elegant paper format or those new-fangled downloadable varieties, by visiting us online at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **Robert Reed**, **Tom Purdom**, **Allen M. Steele**, **Alexander Jablokov**, **Molly Gloss**, **Sara Genge**, **William Preston**, **Peter Friend**, **Barry B. Longyear**, and many others!

### The Lands of the Lost

It's been much too long since James Blaylock gifted us with a book. Until a few months ago, his most recent non-trunk novel was *The Rainy Season* (1999). Another substantial offering was the story collection *13 Phantasms*, from 2000. Both way too long ago for us Blaylock addicts.

Now, of a sudden, he's got three books out! Saints be praised! We'll look at only two of them here, since our focus this month is, as semi-irregularly, on the small press alone. But that should not stop you from immediately rushing out and purchasing the third item, *The Knights of the Cornerstone* (Ace, hardcover, \$23.95, 304 pages, ISBN 978-0441016532).

In 1989, Ken Kesey issued a novel titled *Caverns*, which was a collaboration between the famed writing instructor and his current class of would-be authors. Why do I mention this now? Because one of Blaylock's new titles is *Metamorphosis* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$30.00, 64 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-221-4), which consists of three stories JB wrote with three different students of his. If you can think of another such instance beyond these two books of mentor and mentees collaborating for print, let me know, because I can't!

The ancillary matter—a nice introduction by Tim Powers (who also provides illos!), an afterword by Blaylock, and a second trailer by a certain “William Ashbless”—reveals that the students, for this exercise, boned up on Blaylock's own output, then sought to imitate the master, who subsequently refined their contributions by “adding his own two cents.” The resulting homages are curious creatures.

On the one hand, they read almost like pure Blaylockian fiction. These three stu-

dents—Adriana Campoy, Brittany Cox, and Alex Haniford—nailed the tropes and techniques and characters most often favored by Blaylock. In “Stone Eggs,” Campoy presents us with a whimsical nephew house-sitting for a missing oddball uncle. Cox's “P-38” finds melancholy nostalgia in a going-out-of-business hobby store. And Haniford's “Houses” depicts supernaturalism in the suburbs. So what we have here are three quintessential and entertaining Blaylock pieces—rare and coveted items from a fellow who does not often work at such lengths.

But underneath each tale, like a ghostly murmur, are the unique voices of the youngsters, and they're seductively promising and distinctive. As Powers says, “Remember their names,” for such talents will inevitably shine solo.

All in all, a successful and enjoyable experiment in sharing the work and the glory.

As for Blaylock's own new short novel, *The Ebb Tide* (Subterranean Press, hardcover, \$35.00, 136 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-228-3), I should hardly need to do more than announce that it's a new Langdon St. Ives adventure, the first in that seminal steampunk series in nearly twenty years. Providing a resolution to past mysteries—whatever did happen to the coveted box containing that mysterious cosmic artifact?—the book is more of a pendant than a full-fledged new romp. Nonetheless, it holds everything we've come to love about the series: the chummy heroes, the nefarious villains, the absurd situations and queer Victorian technology. The exploits of St. Ives and his pals barrel along like a cheese-rolling contest, pausing only for moments of quiet exoticism. Here's his portrait of a drowned carriage on the sea bottom.

“It stood upright on the sands as if it

were a museum tableau. . . . The wheels were buried to the axles, the exterior covered with undersea growths—barnacles and opalescent incrustations, decorated by Davey Jones. The skeletons of four horses were tethered to it, and there were human skeletons inside, still traveling hopefully.”

Beautiful, apt, haunting—that pretty much sums up the appeal of Blaylock's whole oeuvre.

### Around the Vancian World

Having ruefully conceded that Jack Vance meant what he said when he maintained that he was done with fiction writing, I had resigned myself to reading no more by one of my favorite writers, and one of the gems of our field. How could I complain, sad as I was? He had given us so much, and was now deservedly enjoying his later years work-free.

Imagine my delight, then, to get a copy of *This Is Me, Jack Vance!* (Subterranean, hardcover, \$40.00, 208 pages, ISBN 978-1-59606-245-0), the master's autobiography. It's too slim for my tastes, but in the end utterly satisfying for its size. Dictated to an amanuensis due to Vance's blindness and inability to employ a computer any longer, the book possesses a chatty air which yet exhibits the refinements of prose that made Vance a byword among stylists. (There are even some famed Vancian footnotes!) The reader is carried along as if being entertained on some tropical veranda by a local cosmopolitan character, a fellow rich with stories and wisdom, who knows just what drinks and food to order, in whatever port.

We begin with Vance's California youth. Born in 1916, the young Vance grows up in a world that seems like fantasy fiction itself from the vantage of 2009. He limns his early burgeonings of talent, his foibles and triumphs, with an objective eye. We stride with him as he inhabits a variety of colorful jobs and educational pursuits. When he marries his life's soulmate, Norma, fathers a child, and become a professional writer, we embark on a series of round-the-world travels that hint at the

sources of Vance's illustrious talent for evoking exoticism. Throughout the tale of his life, the twin refrains of sailing and music run like brilliant leitmotifs.

In a curious way, Vance's account reminded me of Jim Thompson's two autobiographical volumes, *Bad Boy* (1953) and *Roughneck* (1954). Thompson was a brawling, ham-handed misanthrope, while Vance is a gentle, deft lover of humanity, but there's something that links the two. Although Thompson was born ten years earlier, he and Vance shared the same general historical period of their youth. They both evoke in their memoirs a vanished, utterly non-digitized, non-media world, where face-to-face encounters and grappling with physical realities dominated existence and shaped their outlooks. They share an attitude of complete engagement with life. It's as if man and cosmos were locked in a perpetual wrestling match, sometimes humorous, sometimes deadly. As Vance says of himself, when he saw a challenge, he was impelled to take it. This kind of vital grappling with reality and either subduing it or being subdued by it marks their fiction as well.

But in the end, there's no one like Jack Vance, and no fiction like his. To get some sense of the roots of those wonderful stories, and simply to enjoy hanging out in the company of a gifted raconteur, you must add this autobiography to the shelf that contains similar works by Jack Williamson, J.G. Ballard, Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, Damon Knight, and Arthur C. Clarke. Too short a list, really. What wouldn't you give for a similar volume by Sturgeon, Kornbluth, or Sheckley?

### Black Hole No Longer

What an irony! The English-language genre known as science fiction was established by Hugo Gernsback, an immigrant to America from Luxembourg, a land with no small connection to the Germanic peoples. And yet today, do Americans know, revere and enjoy the important Germanic components of their SF heritage? Hardly. As critic and



editor Franz Rottensteiner says in the introduction to his essential new survey, *The Black Mirror and Other Stories: An Anthology of Science Fiction from Germany and Austria* (Wesleyan University Press, trade paper, \$27.95, 432 pages, ISBN 978-0-8195-6831-1), "translated German SF is almost nonexistent, and thus beyond the threshold of visibility." It exists then for Americans beyond the event horizon of some literary black hole.

Rottensteiner sets out to remedy this blindness, removing the metaphorical blackness that enshrouds Germanic SF from the eyes of Americans.

He starts out with a comprehensive chronology and categorization of Germanic SF, all the way from the seventeenth century up to the present. Lucid and compelling, this mini-course in the subject whets the appetite for what's to follow: the representative stories, all translated with aplomb and care and talent by Mike Mitchell, and arrayed in five sections.

The first department is "The Pioneers: Science Fiction Before World War I." Here we get some rather Verne-ian and Wellsian items, such as the two tales by Kurd Lasswitz. One of these chronicles the technological wonders of the year 2371, while the other deals with a utopian scheme. Our next era is "Between the World Wars," a vintage corresponding to pre-Campbellian SF in this country. A piece like Hans Dominik's "A Free Flight in 2222," with its emphasis on the sheer wonder of rocketry, is typical.

"German Science Fiction Comes into Its Own after World War II" actually bypasses the 1950s and leaps right into the 1960s, when such sophisticated writers as Herbert W. Franke and Carl Amery flourished. I particularly enjoyed "The Age of the Burning Mountains," by Horst Pukallus, which wryly portrays the transition to a post-electronic age, due to the Earth's passage through a "Cosmic Cloud."

Next is a detour not in time, but in space: the focus switches to Communist East Germany in "SF from the German Democratic Republic." But all is not drear dogma, as we see in a strikingly

surreal entry like "The Eye That Never Weeps," by the team of Angela and Karlheinz Steinmüller.

The last, longest and strongest section is "The Current Generation: From the 1990s to the Present." Even a passing familiarity with SF from this region will cause such names as Wolfgang Jeschke and Andreas Eschbach to resonate. But then the reader will get pleasant surprises such as Michael Marrak and his "Astrosapiens," which reads like a conflation of Algis Budrys's *Rogue Moon* (1960) and Robert Silverberg's *The Man in the Maze* (1968).

What's most striking about these stories—and I don't think it's an artifact of Rottensteiner's selection process—is a certain uncommercialism, a strange narrative gravitas. Oh, sure, all these pieces appeared in commercial outlets. Yet they seem to lack the genial, but at times meretricious, marketplace voice of American and UK SF. There's no particular emphasis on "action," and on bookmarkable characters and on reader-pleasing feints. A more somber, intellectual heft attaches to even the most light-hearted specimen here. Truly, this volume is a dispatch from another world than ours, best exemplified in the piece that lends its name to the whole.

The title story, by Erik Simon, involves visitors from space who present humans with a one-dimensional object whose front side is the perfect mirror, and whose nonexistent backside is the perfect black hole. Rottensteiner was clever to choose this image for his book's title. Germanic SF was and is indeed a kind of simultaneous reflection and negation of English-language SF, now revealed in all its odd configurations. But hardly one-dimensional at all!

### Shambling Towards Morrowland

The universe which James Morrow inhabits—and of which he is the reigning demiurge—is not ours. Oh, sure, it bears certain points of resemblance to our mundane sphere, attaches to ours tenuously at certain shared loci. But it's a



much bigger, weirder, funnier and more outrageous place, where the corpses of gods get hauled away like dead whales, and famous books can narrate their own stories, among other conceits. Morrow's latest novel, *Shambling Towards Hiroshima* (Tachyon Publications, trade paperback, \$14.95, 192 pages, ISBN 978-1-892391-84-1), while a tad less outré than some of his past conceptions, upholds this standard of jaw-dropping effrontery in the service of art.

The frame-tale around the core of the book is the hurried, desperate composition of one man's memoirs in the year 1984, as he drunkenly occupies a hotel room, facing suicide as his most probable exit.

Syms Thorley once had a major career during the Golden Age of Hollywood. But Thorley's calling, in the far-off year of 1945, was not to play in comedies or romances, nor in westerns or melodramas. No, Thorley specialized in portraying monsters such as the Frankensteinian Corpuscula or the Mummyesque Kha-Ton-Ra. He's very good at what he does, however, and even somewhat proud. With his girlfriend, scriptwriter Darlene, by his side, he's content, and finds life good.

But then Uncle Sam comes calling.

It seems that top-secret Project Knickerbocker needs Thorley's skills. Having bred gigantic fire-breathing lizards intended to wreak havoc on Tokyo (the monsters are hidden out in the California desert), the government has exhibited some last-minute moral compunctions. Rather than simply turn the critters loose without warning on the enemy, they want to try some shock-and-awe first. Thorley will mimic a pint-sized version of the beasts, in a special costume, and, through the ferocity of his filmed performance, convince the Japs to surrender.

Or so the theory goes. But theory does not incorporate such factors as a rival actor, public reaction to a sighting of the costume, and other chaotic intrusions.

Plainly Morrow is working in a more lighthearted and simplified vein than his usual recomplicated and sometimes

densely ideational novels. Like the monster movies from which he draws his inspiration, this book is meant to be all surface effects—humorous rather than scary, in this case—concealing its message beneath a froth of excitement and spectacle. But pulling off such a trick involves at least as much skill as writing a book with more solemnity, and Morrow proves fully up to the challenge.

First, he creates and maintains an utterly authentic and consistent voice for Thorley, both during his heyday and during his despairing decrepitude. You can't help rooting for the guy, admiring his professionalism and sympathizing with the sad course of his life.

Second, Morrow nails the qualities and quirks associated with the genre of monster films. He's plainly done immense research into these pix, and devoted much thought to defining what makes them so appealing. Yet his research never dominates the story.

Likewise, he's recreated the era of the 1940s very believably, summoning up a nostalgic portrait of days gone by that nonetheless incorporates the realism of everyday life. (Although one detail—Dos Equis beer on tap in 1945—seems to me a little anachronistic.)

Finally, he's blended his invented characters and events so smoothly with the historical personages that the interface is seamless. When producer Sam Katzman or director James Whale are onstage with Thorley, they all seem equally "real."

The resulting swift-paced, multi-laughs-per-page tale is something that reads like a collaboration between Ron Goulart and Howard Waldrop. Its satire is not as biting as Morrow's usual acid-dipped fangs, but rather more affectionate: a homage and pastiche in parts. There are no real villains here, no outrageous idiocies or wrong-headedness or folly to condemn. Everyone is merely trying to do the best job they can, insofar as they can define it. The fact that things collapse and fail is part of the structure of the universe, rather than anybody's fault.

It's a lesson you might not expect from the story of a man in a rubber lizard suit.

### Boody Call

Every single review of *Boody: The Bizarre Comics of Boody Rogers* (Fantagraphics, trade paper, \$19.99, 124 pages, ISBN 978-1-56097-961-6) must, by federal law, incorporate the phrase I've used as my section title into the review, so I decided to get it out of the way right up front. Now that that's dispensed with, let me simply advise you to rush out and purchase this compilation immediately. We all owe editor Craig Yoe (and the right-thinking folks at Fantagraphics) a big round of applause for getting the insanely awesome four-color dreams of Mr. Rogers between covers for the first time ever.

Rogers lived a long life, from 1904 to 1996, but he retired from comics in 1952, thus making him an unalloyed Golden Ager. And he took full advantage of the lack of editorial rigidity and marketplace strictures in that nascent commercial art form known as funnybooks to let his imagination and pictorial talent run wild. These surreal stories presage everything from Basil Wolverton to *Mad* magazine to Robert Crumb. Aliens and strange physics abound, as well as plentiful pulp vigor, satire, and irreverence. Additionally we discover some of the same coded fetishism found in early Wonder Woman tales. "The Mysterious Case of Mystery Mountain," with its imagery of bound and bridled women used as horses by a race of centaurs, must have sent some strange hormonal tremors through the minds and fibers of a juvenile audience.

As usual with Fantagraphics books, the design of this volume is superb, as are the reproductions of old artwork. We can only hope for more Boody-ful installments to come.

### Apocalypse Wow

Post-apocalypse fiction is hot. From Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) to the recent *Wastelands* anthology (2008) assembled by John Joseph Adams, our genre—and the mainstream—is awash

in tales of survivors stumbling through the wreckage of civilization.

This grand theme of SF, dating back at least as far as Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), seems particularly relevant these days, as formerly solid institutions—banks, newspapers, the auto industry—suddenly sprout hairline fissures which turn into giant chasms signaling collapse—or, at best, drastic and dramatic sea changes.

The publicity release for *Ball Peen Hammer* (First Second, trade paper, \$17.99, 154 pages, ISBN 978-1-59643-300-7) makes this explicit: "After the economic rollercoaster of this past year, the end of life as we know it is something that's in the forefront of everyone's mind." So the reviewer is immediately moved to ask at the outset: does this graphic novel by writer Adam Rapp and artist George O'Connor deliver a believable day-after-tomorrow catastrophe, ripe with gripping narrative, empathizable characters and cautionary lessons?

Hell, yeah!

The focus of the story is on four main persons. Welton, a musician; Exley, an actress; Underwood, a writer; and Horlick, a "lost boy" adolescent. They occupy a sparse number of sets (Rapp's a playwright by trade), but we get plenty of insight into larger societal conditions through their dialogue. Their city is run by a dictatorial Syndicate, which doles out food, medicines, and punishments amidst plague conditions. A dog-eat-dog ethos prevails, and no one can afford nobility or ethics. Yet touches of real human grace, love, and kindness prevail. Surreal, oneiric moments intrude amidst the ashcan realism. O'Connor's delicate palette and masterful cartoony mimesis perfectly complements Rapp's minimalist staging and speech. It might never be exactly clear how we got from 2009 to this future, but it's all too plausible nonetheless.

Readers might be reminded of Vertigo's *DMZ* series, and Warren Ellis's *Freakanauts*. Toss in an odd flavor or two from Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975), and you've got a potent landscape of monitory horror. ○

# TWENTY-FOURTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

It hardly seems possible that we could be up to the January issue already, but that's what the calendar says—and that means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, which is now in its (can this possibly be true? Seems like only yesterday that we started it!) twenty-fourth year.

**Please vote.** Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from you, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were your favorite stories from Asimov's *Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novelette, short story, poem, and cover artist, you liked best in the year 2009. Just take a moment to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of Asimov's (pp.109-111) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category.

Some cautions: Only material from 2009-dated issues of Asimov's is eligible (no other years, no other magazines, even our sister magazine *Analog*). **Each reader gets one vote, and only one vote.** If you use a photocopy of the ballot, please be sure to include your name and address; your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the **Index**. No matter what category you think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than **February 1, 2010**, and should be addressed to: **Readers' Award, Asimov's Science Fiction, Dell Magazines, 267 Broadway, 4th Flr., New York, NY. 10007.** You can also vote online at [asimovssf@dellmagazines.com](mailto:asimovssf@dellmagazines.com), but you must give us your whole U.S. mailing address. We will also past online ballots at our website, so please check us out at [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com).

Remember, **you**—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. You are in charge here, and what you say goes. In the past, some categories have been hotly contended, with victory or defeat riding on only one or two votes, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for your favorite stories that goes uncounted! So don't put it off—vote today!

**BEST NOVELLA:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**BEST NOVELETTE:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**BEST SHORT STORY:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**BEST POEM:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**BEST COVER:**

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

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## NOVEMBER 2009

- 12-15—Scribbler's Retreat Writers' Conference. For info, write: 620 Sea Isl. Rd. #329, St. Simons Isl. GA 31522. Or phone: (800) 996-2904 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [scribblersretreatwritersconference.com](http://scribblersretreatwritersconference.com). (E-mail) [info@etc.](mailto:info@etc.) Con will be held in: St. Simons Isl. GA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sea Palms Resort. Guests will include: Many.
- 12-15—IlIuXCon. [ilIuXcon.com](http://ilIuXcon.com). Altoona PA. Vallejo & Bell, Whelan, G. Hildebrandt, many more. Fantastic illustration art.
- 13—Hub of Horror. +61 (0)402 267-541. [thehubproductions.com](http://thehubproductions.com). Sydney Australia. Julie Benz, Jeffrey Combs.
- 13-15—New England Fan Experience. (781) 986-8735. [nefanx.com](http://nefanx.com). Boston MA. Nimoy. Multi-genre extravaganza.
- 13-15—TusCon. (520) 571-7180 (fax). [home.earthlink.net/~basfa](http://home.earthlink.net/~basfa). Phoenix AZ. Weston Ochse, Ed Bryant. SF/fantasy.
- 13-15—IzumiCon. (313) 496-5589. [izumicon.com](http://izumicon.com). Sheraton, Midwest City OK. Anime and manga.
- 13-15—Dimensions. +44 (01438) 718-137. [tenthplanetevents.co.uk](http://tenthplanetevents.co.uk). London UK. Sophie Aldred, Sarah Sutton. Dr. Who.
- 13-15—EiretaKon. [eiretakon.com](http://eiretakon.com). Dublin Ireland. Anime.
- 14—OutLantaCon. Holiday Inn NE, Atlanta GA. Adult GLBT (gay, etc.) science fiction and gaming.
- 14—Hub of Horror. +61 (0)402 267-541. [thehubproductions.com](http://thehubproductions.com). Melbourne Australia. Julie Benz, Jeffrey Combs.
- 20-22—PhilCon. (877) 656-3914. [philcon.org](http://philcon.org). Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ. L. A. Banks, Frank Wu. The oldest SF con.
- 20-22—Anime USA. [animeusa.org](http://animeusa.org). Hyatt, Crystal City (Arlington) VA (near DC). Many guests. Anime. "Of, by, for otaku."
- 20-22—Another Anime Con. [anotheranimecon.com](http://anotheranimecon.com). [lisa@anotheranimecon.com](mailto:lisa@anotheranimecon.com). Radisson, Nashua NH. Wendy Powell.
- 20-22—Arkansas Anime Festival. [arkansasanimefestival.com](http://arkansasanimefestival.com). Cosmopolitan Hotel, Fayetteville AR. G. James, J. Erikson.
- 20-22—BishieCon. (314) 849-1836. [bishiecon.com](http://bishiecon.com). Holiday Inn SW Viking, St. Louis MO. A. Belcher, Y. Abraham. Anime.
- 20-22—Anime Crossroads. [animecrossroads.com](http://animecrossroads.com). Marriott East, Indianapolis IN. Vic Mignona, David Williams.
- 20-22—DaishoCon. [daishocon.com](http://daishocon.com). Ramada, Stevens Point WI. T. Willingham, L. Bailey, P. Rothfuss, T. Seely. Anime.
- 20-22—Horror Hound Weekend. [horrorhoundweekend.com](http://horrorhoundweekend.com). Sheraton North, Cincinnati OH. Horror media.
- 20-22—ZonaCon. [zonacon.com](http://zonacon.com). Holiday Inn International Drive, Orlando FL. Many guests. Horror media.
- 27-28—KeoKon, 1707 Ridge, Keokuk IA 52632. (319) 670-9444. [keokon.com](http://keokon.com). Holiday Inn Express. Fanfic and anime.
- 27-29—LosCon, 11513 Burbank Blvd., N. Hollywood CA 91601. [loscon.org](http://loscon.org). LAX Marriott, Los Angeles CA. SF/fantasy.
- 27-29—StarFury, 148a Queensway, London W2 6LY, UK. (+44) 07930 319-119. [seanharry@aol.com](mailto:seanharry@aol.com). Battlestar Galactica.
- 27-29—Tomodachi Fest, 123 Sunnyside Dr., Caldwell ID 83605. [tomodachifest.com](http://tomodachifest.com). Holiday Inn Airport, Boise ID. Anime.
- 27-29—Darkover, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. [darkovercon.org](http://darkovercon.org). Crowne Plaza, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. MZB fans.

## DECEMBER 2009

- 4-6—SMOFCOn, c/o ALAMO, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. [alamo-sf.org](http://alamo-sf.org). Hilton Garden Inn. Con organizers talk shop.
- 18-20—Anime South, Box 1591, Destin FL 32540. Hilton Sandestin. P. Seitz, J. Y. Bosch, Maja, M. Placko, Eshshine.
- 31—MEWCon, 4570 SW Meuller Dr. H305, Beaverton OR 97007. [mewcon.com](http://mewcon.com). Red Lion, Vancouver WA. Manga.

## AUGUST 2010

- 5-8—ReConStruction, Box 31706, Raleigh NC 27612. [reconstructionsf.org](http://reconstructionsf.org). The North American SF Convention. \$95.

## SEPTEMBER 2010

- 2-6—Aussiecon 4, GPO Box 1212, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia. [aussiecon4.org.au](http://aussiecon4.org.au). World SF Convention. US\$175.

## AUGUST 2011

- 17-21—RenoVation, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. [rcfi.org](http://rcfi.org). Reno NV. Asher, Brown, Powers, Vallejo. WorldCon. \$140.

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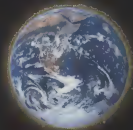
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